The Rerun

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/75640506.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warnings:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hazbin Hotel (Cartoon)
Relationship:	Alastor/Vox (Hazbin Hotel)
Characters:	Alastor (Hazbin Hotel), Vox (Hazbin Hotel)
Additional Tags:	Time Travel Fix-It, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Toxic Yaoi, Slow Burn, Enemies to Lovers, Pathetic Weatherman x Serial Killer Diva
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-12 Updated: 2026-03-13 Words: 239,048 Chapters: 65/10,001

The Rerun

by corporate_hierophant

Summary

Hell is other people. Purgatory is being a twenty something weatherman with the memories of a being a media overlord who had the entirety of Hell wrapped around his finger.

Sent back to his mortal life with a chance to "do it right this time", Vox has a problem. The Angels have installed a patch in his soul: the Pacifist Protocol. If he tries to kill a rival, poison a boss, or throw a punch, he is paralyzed by blinding agony.

He cannot claw his way to the top if he can't use his claws. He needs a loophole.

Notes

Slow burn tag means SLOW burn. Chapter count isn't much of an exaggeration. Mwah!~

Chapter 1

"Vincent! For the love of God, the maps! The pressure front isn't going to draw itself!"

The body moved before the mind had fully settled into it. It was a reflex, a phantom limb sensation of muscle memory that belonged to a life dead and buried for decades. Fingers scrambled across the cluttered surface of a drafting table, snatching up a roll of vellum and a piece of charcoal. The sensation was revoltingly tactile. There was no hum of electricity beneath the skin, no reassuring buzz of a digital network feeding information directly into his cortex. There was only the dry, scratching friction of paper against skin and the overwhelming, suffocating scent of stale cigarette smoke and floor wax.

Vox blinked.

He stood in the center of a bustling newsroom that felt less like a place of business and more like a tomb for ambition. Men in suspenders and shirtsleeves moved around, shouting over the clatter of typewriters that sounded like heavy rain on a tin roof. He looked down at his own chest. He was wearing a suit of cheap, itchy wool.

"Vincent! Are you deaf or just stupid today?"

The voice belonged to a short, spherical man with a complexion dangerously close to uncooked ham. Mr. Sterling. The name slowly surfaced from the dredge of Vox's recovered memories. The Station Manager. A man who, in a fair world, would never have been entrusted with any authority.

"I have the maps, Mr. Sterling," Vox said, his voice tinged with a hesitant charm, smooth yet automatic. "The pressure front… I've got it."

"Then get it to the board!" Sterling barked, mopping his forehead with a handkerchief that had seen better days. "We go live in five, and if you're staring into space like a lobotomized

pigeon when the red light goes on, you'll be forecasting the weather from the unemployment line. Move!"

Vox moved. It was like operating a machine with the calibration knocked loose. His balance was off, his steps landed too hard, as if the floor were tugging at him.

Navigating the maze of desks, a wave of vertigo washed over him so sharply he almost caught himself on the edge of a typist's table. Yesterday, or what felt like mere moments ago, he had been in Hell.

Last thing he remembered was the white light. The searing, blinding indifference of High Heaven.

Something beyond the Seraphim. Something so vast that anger would have been far too personal an emotion. What he had felt was nothing like anything he had ever known.

"Live the life you squandered," the voice had thrummed, cold and absolute. "Correct the path. Prove the soul is malleable."

He had been reformatted. Rebooted. Shoved back into the casing of Vincent Whittman, a junior meteorologist and glorified errand boy for this dingy television station.

He reached the large corkboard map of the tri-state area and pinned the vellum up with practiced, steady motion. The studio lights overhead were tungsten. Hot, yellow, and buzzing at a frequency that made his teeth ache. He remembered how much he'd always hated them. He'd hated all of it: the primitive technology, the massive cameras that looked like industrial ovens and the tangles of rubber coated wires that sprawled across the floor like dead snakes. It was the stone age of broadcasting.

"Straighten your tie, Whittman, you look like a drunk," a cameraman muttered as he squeezed past, wrestling a tripod.

Vox didn't respond. He smoothed the cheap fabric of the tie, staring at his reflection in the curve of a camera lens. A pale, unremarkable face stared back. Brown hair, combed neatly to the side, and mismatched eyes that looked sharp but held no real power.

I am going to burn this entire building to the ground, he thought, the sentiment bubbling up with a comforting familiarity. In a few years, some of these people would be dead anyway. The rest forgotten. None of them would leave a mark.

Only he ever had.

The thought was soothing, a familiar anchor in a sea of disorientation. He did not act on it, not yet. He was too unsteady, too busy concentrating on the simple task of keeping this meatsack upright. He did not realize he was gripping the chalk rail of the map board until his knuckles turned white. The typists, the runners, the chainsmoking scriptwriters glanced at him with mild confusion, but nothing more.

To them, he wasn't a fallen Overlord dealing with the metaphysical horror of reincarnation. He was just Vincent, who was acting a little twitchy today. Perhaps he hadn’t had his morning coffee. Perhaps he was hungover.

"Thirty seconds to air!" someone shouted from the booth.

Vox stepped back into the shadows, his role for the moment complete. His job was to prepare the board, fetch the coffee, and disappear until the forecast segment, where he would be allowed to point at clouds for ninety seconds. The indignity of it burned in his stomach like swallowed acid. He, who had commanded the living and the dead, who had held millions’ attention in the palm of his hand, was now reduced to waiting for permission to speak about the probability of drizzle.

He watched the red "ON AIR" light flicker to life above the sound booth door. It was the only thing in the room that held any beauty. That crimson glow was a universal constant, the one bridge between the hellscape he ruled and this purgatory he inhabited. It meant live. It meant eyes were watching. Even here, in this smoky, beige nightmare, the power of the broadcast remained.

A sudden exhaustion crashed over him, spiritual and absolute. He was tasked with redemption, with "doing it right." They expected him to learn humility. They expected him to find value in the quiet, honest labor of a human life.

Vox adjusted his cuffs, feeling the ghost of static prick beneath his skin. He watched Mr. Sterling scream silently at a production assistant through the glass of the control booth, his face turning a deeper shade of violet.

Humility. Right.

Who did they think they were, imagining he could be reduced to a background character? The sheer audacity of it was almost funny.

He was not going to learn humility. He was going to conquer this decade. He would tear this primitive industry apart and rebuild it in his image, copper wire by copper wire. If they wanted him to live this life again, he would. But he would not live it small. He would play the game, climb the ladder, and squeeze this entire era until it gave him what he was owed.

And if anyone had a problem with that, they could send him back to Hell. He'd do the same thing there. *Again.*

He paused, the thought tangling in his mind. *They would send him back to hell, right? Where else could they possibly send him? Super hell?*

He looked around the studio and let out a long, wry sigh. *Maybe they already had.*

"Vincent!" Sterling's voice spilled out of the booth as the door swung open during the commercial break. "Coffee! Black! And if it's cold, you're drinking it off the floor!"

Vox turned, a polite, rehearsed smile stretching across his face. He told himself it probably looked natural. Probably.

"Right away, sir," he said, his voice steady. "Hot and black. Just how you like it."

He walked toward the breakroom, the sound of his cheap shoes clicking against the linoleum. He was trapped in a cage of flesh, surrounded by idiots, and armed with nothing but a map of a low-pressure system moving in from the coast.

It was going to be a very long lifetime.

Chapter 2

The coffee machine in the breakroom sounded like it was dying. It wheezed and gurgled with the dramatic intensity of a tubercular patient in a Victorian novel, spitting out a thin stream of liquid that was technically brown but could not, in good conscience, be called coffee.

Vox stared at it with the cold analytical gaze of a man watching his enemy bleed out.

The machine was a monument to everything wrong with this timeline. It was inefficient, loud, and produced a beverage that tasted like someone had strained dirty dishwater through a sock.

This thing sucked. It simply existed, taking up space and making noise, much like ninety percent of the people in this building.

He poured the sludge into a chipped mug that read "World's Best Dad" in faded letters. The irony was not lost on him. Sterling had three ex-wives and a restraining order from his eldest daughter. Vox had done his research back in the day. It had taken him less than a week to piece together the entire social architecture of the station from overheard gossip and discarded memos.

The network was a mid tier television operation that served the greater metropolitan area with programming that could generously be described as "adequate." They had news at six, a morning variety show hosted by a woman whose smile never reached her eyes, and a rotating cast of middle aged men who read advertisements for dish soap with the gravitas usually reserved for declarations of war.

Vox set the coffee pot down and took a moment to simply breathe.

The air here was *wrong*. Too thin. Too full of particulate matter from cigarettes and the ancient heating system that rattled in the walls like a dying beast. Every breath was a

reminder of limitation. Of biology. Of the fact that he could die from something as stupid as pneumonia or a badly timed fall down the stairs.

He picked up Sterling's coffee and headed back through the newsroom.

The chaos had shifted. The typewriters were still clattering, but now there was an undercurrent of panic. Someone had apparently misplaced an entire segment script for the evening broadcast, and there was a very real possibility that the prime time slot would not get utilized properly.

Vox felt nothing about this. Let them panic. Let them scramble. It wasn't his problem.

His problem was sitting in Sterling's office, behind a door that was slightly ajar, revealing the man himself hunched over his desk like a troll guarding a bridge made of paperwork.

"You took your time," Sterling grunted, not looking up from the script he was massacring with a red pen.

"The machine was slow, sir," Vox said, setting the coffee down on the only clear spot on the desk. "I can requisition a new one if-"

"With what budget?" Sterling barked a laugh that sounded like a seal being clubbed. "We're not made of money, Whittman. We make do with what we have. That's the American way."

The American way is going to bankrupt you in five years, Vox thought, smile shifting from fake and deferential into something more genuine, amused. *And then you'll hang yourself in your basement.*

"Of course, sir," he said instead. "Will you be needing anything else?"

Sterling waved a dismissive hand, already forgetting he existed. "Get back to your desk. And for God's sake, try to look like you're doing something useful. Jenkins from upstairs was asking questions about staffing efficiency, and I don't need him thinking I'm running a charity for daydreamers."

Vox nodded, retreating from the office with the practiced deference of someone who knew exactly how much disdain he could hide behind a polite expression.

Jenkins from upstairs. As if he was supposed to remember who that was.

The walk back to his desk felt longer than it should have. His shoes were too tight. Vincent's shoes were apparently half a size smaller than his feet, and the cheap leather was already rubbing blisters into his heels. Another indignity.

He sat down at his desk, a battered metal thing shoved into a corner near the supply closet and pulled out the stack of weather reports that needed to be filed.

The work was mindnumbing. Categorizing precipitation patterns. Updating temperature logs. Making sure the maps were properly labeled for the weekend forecast. It was the kind of task that would have delegated to his employees in a heartbeat. Now it was going to take him three hours and there was a non-zero chance he'd make a mistake because his hand was already cramping.

He picked up a pencil and began to work, his jaw tight.

Around him, the newsroom continued its chaotic hum. Mabel from classifieds was arguing with Roger from sales about whose fault it was that an advertisement for funeral services had been placed directly next to the children's programming schedule. The junior reporter who'd been crying earlier was now drinking something from a flask he kept in his desk drawer. One of the cameramen was trying to fix a jammed film reel with what appeared to be a butter knife.

Vox observed it all with the detached interest of an anthropologist studying a particularly primitive tribe.

These people were *satisfied* with this. They showed up, did their jobs with varying degrees of competence, collected their paychecks, and went home to their small lives in their small apartments where they ate their small dinners and dreamed their small dreams.

It was horrifying.

It was also exactly the kind of environment he could exploit.

The station's hierarchy was simple enough. Sterling at the top, supported by a thin layer of middle management who were slightly less incompetent but infinitely more paranoid about losing their positions. Below them, the "talent": the hosts, the reporters, the personalities who actually appeared on air and generated revenue. And then, at the bottom, the support staff. The producers, the technicians, the researchers. The functionaries who kept the machine running but were never seen.

It was a pyramid. Predictable. Stable.

And therefore, entirely exploitable.

The problem was getting away with it.

Vox set down his pencil and leaned back in his chair, the metal protesting with a squeal that made several people glance in his direction. He ignored them, his mind already spinning through logistics.

Getting away with murder, theoretically, was easy. Forensic science was still in its infancy, and most police departments were staffed by men whose investigative techniques peaked at "ask around and hope someone saw something."

The real challenge was opportunity and motive. Vincent Whittman was a nobody. A junior meteorologist with no criminal record, no history of violence, no obvious grudges. If Sterling turned up dead, there'd be no reason to suspect him. He'd be questioned, certainly. Everyone would be questioned, but there was nothing tying him to the crime.

Except.

Vox frowned, drumming his fingers against the desk.

Except he didn't actually *want* Sterling dead. Not yet, anyway. Sterling was an obstacle, yes, but he was also a stepping stone. The man had connections. A network of contacts in local government, advertisers, other stations. Killing him now would be wasteful. It would create chaos without benefiting from that chaos. It's not like anyone would give him such a high position to him.

No, what he needed was to *use* Sterling. Extract value from him. Maneuver him into a position where his inevitable self-destruction would clear a path upward rather than simply create a mess.

But God, it would feel *satisfying* to just strangle the man and be done with it.

Vox closed his eyes, visualizing it with the precision of someone who'd done this sort of thing many, many times before. Sterling would struggle, obviously. He was fat but not weak, and panic gave people surprising strength. There'd be a fight. Thirty seconds, maybe forty five. Then the thrashing would stop, the eyes would glaze, and it would be done.

The only question was disposal. The building had a basement, but it was heavily trafficked. Too many people coming and going, too many opportunities to be seen. The river was an option, but getting a body out of the building and into a vehicle without being noticed required either a vehicle he didn't have or an accomplice he didn't trust.

Maybe the furnace? No... too small, and the smell would be absolutely-

His pencil snapped in half.

Vox looked down at his hand, surprised. He hadn't realized he'd been gripping it that hard. The wood had splintered between his fingers, leaving a small puncture wound in his palm that was already welling with blood.

He stared at it for a moment, then grabbed a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around his hand. The pain was sharp and immediate, grounding him back in the present.

Right. He was getting ahead of himself.

First, he needed to understand the landscape. Map the territory. Remember who had power, who wanted power, and who could be convinced to do terrible things if properly motivated.

And he needed to do it without drawing attention to himself.

The beauty of being utterly insignificant was that no one expected anything from him. He was furniture. Wallpaper. The kind of person people's eyes slid past without registering.

He unwrapped his hand, examining the small wound. Already clotting. Minor. Meaningless.

Right now he was a little *too* invisible. When no one noticed, no one would defend you if suspicion ever fell. That was why he always had someone to vouch for him. A quiet nod. A whispered, *Vincent? He's a good guy,* if anyone started asking questions. He had never needed someone to vouch for him before, but it was still reassuring to have that guarantee.

His gaze drifted across the newsroom again, cataloging faces and roles with fresh purpose.

His eyes settled on the woman by the filing cabinets.

Early thirties. Practical clothing that had been mended multiple times. Dark hair pinned back with the kind of severe efficiency that suggested she had neither the time nor the patience for anything decorative. She was organizing files with sharp, controlled movements that suggested either deep focus or barely contained rage.

Possibly both.

Vox searched Vincent's memories for context.

Research department. Background checks. Fact verification. The unglamorous work that kept the station running but earned zero recognition. Her name was... Pauline?

Last week she'd asked Sterling for a raise. Vincent had walked past the office just as Sterling told her that if she wanted more money, she should "smile more" and "consider herself lucky to have employment in this economy."

He stood, gathering his weather reports, and made his way toward the filing cabinets with the casual aimlessness of someone just stretching their legs.

"Excuse me," he said, his voice pitched to be polite but not intrusive. "I'm looking for the archive reports from October? Sterling needs them for... something. He wasn't specific."

Pauline glanced up, her expression hovering somewhere between exhausted and homicidal. Up close, he could see the tension in her jaw, the faint shadows under her eyes that spoke of too many late nights and too little appreciation.

"October of what year?" she asked, her tone clipped.

"Ah." Vox blinked, letting carefully calculated helplessness seep into his expression. "He... didn't say."

She stared at him for a long moment. He could practically see her internal debate: was it worth the energy to be annoyed at him, or should she save that energy for the people who actually deserved it?

Finally, she sighed. "Bottom drawer. Left side. They're organized by month, then by department. Try not to mess up the system."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Vox said, crouching down to pull open the drawer.

He took his time, making a show of carefully flipping through the files. The system really was impressive. Color-coded tabs, precise labeling, cross-references noted in neat handwriting. This woman had built something functional and elegant in an environment that rewarded neither quality.

"You're very organized," he said after a moment, letting genuine admiration color his voice. "This whole system. It's impressive. Most people would have just thrown everything in alphabetically and called it a day."

Pauline didn't respond immediately. When he glanced up, she was looking at him with the wary suspicion of someone who'd learned not to trust compliments.

"It's my job," she said flatly.

"Right. Of course." Vox pulled out a random folder, pretending to examine it. "Still. I imagine it's thankless work. No one notices when things are organized. They only notice when they can't find something."

Something shifted in her expression. Not warmth, exactly. More like the faint easing of a clenched muscle.

"You'd be surprised," she said, her voice dry as bone, "how often people blame me when they can't find something because they never filed it in the first place."

Vox smiled. Sympathetic. Conspiratorial. The smile of someone who seemingly understood what it was like to be undervalued and overworked.

He stood, folder in hand. "Thank you for your help. I'll make sure these get back exactly where they belong."

He walked away before she could respond, feeling her gaze on his back.

Back at his desk, Vox set down the folder and allowed himself a thin smile.

First contact established.

Pauline seemed competent, resentful, with access to every piece of information that flowed through this station. A research specialist who knew where all the bodies were buried... metaphorically speaking.

For now.

Vox smiled to himself, small and cold.

Rome wasn't built in a day. But it burned in one.

He just had to be patient.

Chapter 3

The key didn't fit.

Vox stood in the narrow hallway of the apartment building, staring at the brass lock with the kind of focused hatred usually reserved for personal enemies. The key was in his hand. The door was in front of him. The number matched the address on the rent receipt he'd found in his own wallet.

And yet.

The key turned halfway, caught on something, and refused to go further.

He tried again. Jiggled it. Applied more pressure. Nothing.

Around him, the building exhaled the particular smell of urban decay: boiled cabbage, mildew, and something that might have been a dead rat in the walls. The wallpaper was peeling in long strips that curled away from the plaster like skin after a bad burn. Somewhere above him, a radio played big band music through a crackling speaker.

"You gotta lift it," a voice said.

Vox turned. An elderly woman in a housecoat stood in the doorway across the hall, watching him with the detached curiosity of someone who had nothing better to do at eleven o'clock at night.

"The door," she continued, gesturing with a cigarette that sent ash drifting to the stained carpet. "It sticks. You gotta lift the handle up while you turn the key. New tenant?"

"No," Vox said, his voice flat. "I've lived here for... a while."

The woman squinted at him, then shrugged. "Could've fooled me."

She retreated into her apartment, the door closing with a soft click that somehow sounded judgmental.

Vox lifted the handle. Turned the key. The lock gave with a grudging click.

The apartment inside was worse than he'd remembered.

One room. A kitchenette that consisted of a hot plate and a sink. A Murphy bed that pulled down from the wall and probably harbored bedbugs. A single armchair positioned in front of a radio that sat on an overturned crate. And in the corner, near the window with its view of a brick wall, a fish tank.

The tank was small, maybe five gallons, with a layer of gravel at the bottom that had gone gray with accumulated filth. A single guppy swam in lazy circles, its tail fin ragged and colorless.

Vox stood in the doorway for a long moment, his hand still on the knob.

This was it. This was where Vincent Whittman lived. Where *he* lived. This shoebox with its peeling paint and the faint smell of something rotting in the walls.

He closed the door behind him. Locked it. Set his briefcase down on the floor because there was nowhere else to put it.

Then he pulled down the Murphy bed and sat on the edge, staring at nothing.

- - -

The first coherent thought that surfaced was: *I need to sleep.*

The second was: *I can't.*

His body was exhausted. It had been awake for nearly eighteen hours, performing tasks that required standing, walking, concentrating on minutiae that didn't matter. The muscles ached. The feet throbbed from those too-tight shoes. The eyes burned from the fluorescent lights and cigarette smoke.

He lay back on the bed, feeling the springs dig into his spine through the thin mattress. The ceiling above him was water-stained, yellowed blotches that looked like continents on a map. He traced their shapes with his eyes, trying to ground himself in something concrete.

Hell had been real. He remembered it with perfect clarity. The towers of glass and neon that stretched into a red sky. The hum of electricity that sang through his veins like a second circulatory system. The sensation of reaching out with his consciousness and touching thousands of screens simultaneously, feeling the collective pulse of attention and fear and desire that he commanded with effortless precision. He could...

He stopped that line of thought before it could fully form.

The point was, it had been real. He'd lived it. Decades of it. Building an empire from nothing, clawing his way up through blood and strategy and the kind of ruthless efficiency that made other demons either worship or avoid him.

Vox rolled onto his side, pulling his knees up toward his chest. The position was uncomfortable, wrong. His body didn't fit together the way it should. Everything was too small, too limited.

He'd woken up this morning in this body, in this world, with Vincent Whittman's memories flooding his consciousness like someone had cracked open his skull and poured in a lifetime of mediocrity. The walk to work. The apologetic smile he used when Sterling yelled at him. The stop at the grocery store on the way home, standing in front of the shelves too long, deciding between brands he didn't care about.

It was pathetic.

And it was all he had.

Vox sat up abruptly, his heart hammering in his chest. The panic was rising now, hot and acidic in his throat. He swung his legs off the bed and stood, needing to move, needing to *do something* before his brain finished processing the full horror of his situation.

He'd tried before. In the original timeline Vincent had worked so fucking hard. Late nights at the station, taking on extra shifts, volunteering for projects no one else wanted. Sucking up to Sterling, laughing at his jokes, fetching his coffee with a smile that never wavered.

For what?

Nothing changed. The same position. The same ceiling. The same men promoted ahead of him because they were louder, better liked, better connected. Effort alone had never moved the world.

So Vincent stopped waiting for it to. He took his future into his own hands and began removing the obstacles in his way quietly, efficiently, one rung at a time.

And now he was supposed to do it *again*?

"No," Vox said aloud, his voice harsh in the silent apartment. "Absolutely fucking not."

He started pacing, three steps to the wall, three steps back. The apartment was too small for proper pacing. He felt like a tiger in a cage, muscles coiled with energy that had nowhere to go.

He needed a plan. Something better than what Vincent had done. He knew how this life went now. He had the roadmap of every mistake, every wasted effort, every humiliation. He could avoid them. He could be *smarter*.

But how?

Murder was the obvious answer. Remove Sterling. Clear the path. Step into the vacuum and seize control before anyone else could react.

Except...

Vox stopped pacing, his hands clenching into fists at his sides.

Even if Sterling died tomorrow - tripped down the stairs, choked on his lunch, had a convenient stroke - there was no guarantee Vox would get his position. The network had hierarchy. Protocol. They'd bring in someone from outside, or promote one of the middle managers who'd been there longer, who had connections Vox didn't have.

"Think," he muttered, resuming his pacing. "Think, think, *think*-"

His shin collided with the edge of the armchair.

Pain exploded up his leg, sharp and immediate. Vox stumbled, catching himself on the arm of the chair, and the sheer *injustice* of stubbing his toe sent a wave of rage through him so intense his vision whited out at the edges.

He grabbed the first thing his hand found, a ceramic ashtray on the side table, and hurled it at the wall.

It exploded into pieces with a satisfying *crack*, shards scattering across the floor.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Vox stood there, breathing hard, staring at the broken ceramic. His hand was shaking. His whole body was shaking.

"I never wanted redemption!" The words tore out of him, raw and furious. "I never *asked* for this! Who the fuck do they think they are, deciding I need to... to what? Learn? Grow? Become a better person?!"

He laughed, the sound bitter. "I was *fine* where I was!"

His voice echoed off the walls, too loud in the cramped space.

He stood there for a moment longer, chest heaving, and then turned sharply away from the broken ashtray.

His gaze landed on the fish tank.

The guppy was still swimming its endless circles, completely oblivious to his breakdown. Its fins moved in lazy waves, propelling it through the murky water with the kind of mindless contentment that made Vox want to smash the tank against the wall just to watch it thrash on the carpet.

He walked over, crouching down to eye level with the glass.

The fish looked at him. Or maybe it didn't. It was impossible to tell with fish. Their dead, glassy eyes showed nothing.

"You have it easy," Vox said quietly. "No expectations. No ambitions. Just... swimming in circles until you die."

The fish flicked its tail and continued swimming.

Vox pressed his forehead against the cool glass, closing his eyes.

He needed to think strategically. He needed to-

BANG BANG BANG

The pounding on the door was so loud and sudden that Vox jerked back, nearly losing his balance.

"WHAT THE FUCK!" A man's voice, muffled but furious. "KEEP IT DOWN IN THERE! SOME OF US HAVE TO WORK IN THE MORNING!"

More pounding. The door rattled in its frame.

"YOU WOKE ME UP, ASSHOLE! IF I HEAR ONE MORE SOUND, I'M CALLING THE LANDLORD!"

Vox stayed very still, crouched by the fish tank, his jaw clenched so tight his teeth ached.

The pounding stopped. Footsteps retreated down the hall, accompanied by muttered curses.

Vox took a deep breath. Held it. Let it out slowly.

He stood, brushing off his pants, and returned to the armchair. Sat down carefully, with one leg crossed at the knee.

The rage was still there, simmering under his skin, but he forced it down. Compartmentalized it. He couldn't afford to lose control. Not here. Not when he had nothing and no one.

He looked at the fish tank again.

According to his memories he'd been at the station for three weeks. Three weeks of fetching coffee and preparing weather maps and being so utterly forgettable that people had to check his name tag to remember who he was.

He was a newbie. A nobody. Completely and totally expendable.

Which meant.

Vox leaned back in the chair, staring at the ceiling.

Which meant he needed to become someone they noticed. Someone competent. Someone *valuable*.

He couldn't kill his way to the top. Not yet. Not without the groundwork. But he could make himself indispensable. He could position himself as the person they turned to when things went wrong. The one who fixed problems. The one who made everyone's life easier.

It would take time. Patience. Careful, calculated moves that wouldn't draw suspicion.

But he'd done harder things than this.

Vox smiled, thin and cold, in the darkness of his apartment.

He glanced at the broken ashtray on the floor, at the scattered shards catching the faint light from the street lamp outside.

The guppy swam in its circle, endless and mindless, and Vox watched it until his breathing slowed and his thoughts began to crystallize into something resembling a plan.

Chapter 4

The trick to being competent, Vox discovered, was to be competent at things no one else wanted to do.

The filing system in the research department was a disaster. Three different organizational methods competing for dominance, none of them properly implemented. Vox spent his lunch break which was unpaid, naturally, reorganizing the weather archives by date, region, and severity. He didn't ask permission. He just did it, methodically and efficiently, leaving a small typed note on Pauline's desk explaining the new system.

The coffee machine still produced liquid that tasted like mud, but he figured out that if you ran it twice through the same grounds and added a pinch of salt to the pot, it became almost drinkable. Sterling noticed. Commented on it. "Finally figured out how to make a decent cup, Whittman. Took you long enough."

Vox smiled. Nodded. Refilled the cup without being asked.

The weather maps for the evening broadcast had been prepared sloppily by the morning shift. Vox redrew them entirely, adding pressure gradients and wind direction indicators that made the forecast not only more accurate but visually clearer. The evening meteorologist, a man named Chuck who wore the same tie three days in a row, grunted his approval and didn't bother to mention who'd actually done the work.

Vox didn't care. That wasn't the point.

The point was that people were starting to rely on him. Starting to expect things to be *better* when he touched them. It was a foundation. Small, invisible, but solid.

By Thursday afternoon, he'd positioned himself as the person who Fixed Things. The broken typewriter in the bullpen? Vox unjammed it. The missing script pages for the morning show? Vox found them in the trash where someone had thrown them by mistake. The scheduling

conflict between two programs that threatened to derail Friday's lineup? Vox solved it with a five-minute conversation and a willingness to shuffle time slots that no one else had bothered to consider.

He was useful.

And usefulness, in an organization like this, was currency.

He was in the breakroom, preparing Sterling's afternoon coffee - two sugars, no cream, hot enough to scald, when he heard voices from the hallway. Not shouting. Casual conversation. The kind that happened when people thought they had privacy.

Vox's hand paused mid-pour.

"—still think it's a waste of time," Sterling was saying, his voice carrying through the half-open door. "Radio personalities are a dime a dozen. Why are we courting this one specifically?"

"Because he's not a dime a dozen." The second voice belonged to Charles Brennan, the Executive Producer. Older, smoother, the kind of man who smiled with his mouth but never his eyes. "His show pulls numbers we'd kill for. Prime time slot, consistent ratings, advertising revenue out the ears. If we can get him on our broadcast even once, it's a coup."

"And you think he'll agree to it?" Sterling sounded skeptical. "Man like that, he doesn't need us."

"That's why Friday's so important." Brennan's voice lowered slightly, conspiratorial. "It's neutral ground. Social. We're not pitching him in a boardroom, we're breaking bread. Making connections. You know how this works, Sterling. You wine them, dine them, make them feel special, and then..."

"And then you've got leverage." Sterling chuckled, the sound wet and unpleasant. "Fine. But if I'm spending my Friday evening schmoozing some radio prima donna, he better be worth it."

"Oh, he's worth it." Brennan's tone turned almost reverent. "You've heard his show, haven't you? The man's got presence. Charisma. He could read a phone book and people would tune in. And the sponsors love him. Everyone wants a piece of Alastor's audience."

Vox's hand jerked.

The coffee pot tipped.

Hot liquid cascaded across the counter, splashing onto the floor in a spreading brown puddle. The pot itself slipped from his grip, hitting the linoleum with a ceramic *crack* that sent shards skittering across the tile.

"What the hell!" Sterling's voice cut off mid-sentence.

Both men appeared in the doorway, staring at the mess. At Vox, standing frozen with coffee dripping from his fingers onto the floor.

"Christ, Whittman!" Sterling's face flushed that dangerous shade of crimson. "Do you have any idea how much those cost?!"

"I..." Vox's voice came out distant, distracted. "I apologize. I'll clean it up."

"You're damn right you'll clean it up!" Sterling gestured furiously at the spreading puddle. "And you're paying for the replacement pot out of your paycheck! I don't care if... Are you even listening to me?!"

Vox wasn't.

He was staring at nothing, his mind racing through the sudden, violent realization that *of course* Alastor was here. Of course he existed in this timeline. Why wouldn't he? The man had been human once, before Hell, before becoming the Radio Demon. This was that time. This was *when* Alastor had been alive.

And Vox had somehow, stupidly, *forgotten*.

"Whittman!" Sterling snapped his fingers in front of Vox's face. "What's wrong with you today? You're acting like you've been hit in the head with a brick."

"Who's Alastor?" The question tumbled out before Vox could stop it.

Both men blinked at him.

"Who's..." Sterling's expression shifted from angry to incredulous. "Do you live under a rock? Alastor's only the biggest radio host in the area."

"I don't listen to the radio much," Vox said, his voice sharpening, growing more insistent. "What's his show about?"

"Why do you care?" Brennan's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Well," Vox scrambled for an excuse that wouldn't sound insane. "If he's as popular as you say, I should know about the competition. Industry awareness. That's important, isn't it?"

Sterling snorted. "Radio isn't competition for television. Different mediums. Different audiences."

"But you're trying to get him on your broadcast," Vox pressed, ignoring the coffee still spreading across the floor. "So he must be valuable. What does he do? What makes him special?"

Brennan exchanged a glance with Sterling, the kind of look that said *is this guy serious?*

"He does a late-night show," Brennan said slowly, as if explaining to a child. "Music, news, commentary. But it's not what he does, it's how he does it. The man's got a voice like velvet. He's charming, funny, sharp. He can make you feel like he's talking directly to you, like you're the only person listening. That's talent you can't teach."

"And he's particular," Sterling added, his tone grudging but impressed. "Doesn't do many public appearances. Keeps to himself mostly. Which is why Friday's such an opportunity. The network dinner, it's exclusive. Invitation only. The man's actually going to be in the same room as us."

Vox's heart was hammering against his ribs. "Where is it? The dinner?"

Sterling laughed, the sound sharp and dismissive. "Not that it matters to you, but it's at The Starlight Room. Downtown. Five courses, open bar, all the industry bigwigs you can stomach." He waved a hand. "Now stop asking stupid questions and clean up this mess before someone slips and breaks their neck."

"And for God's sake," Brennan added as he turned to leave, "if you're going to eavesdrop on private conversations, at least have the decency to be subtle about it."

They walked away, their footsteps fading down the hall.

Vox stood in the spreading pool of coffee, barely noticing the heat soaking through his shoes.

Alastor.

The name echoed in his mind like a bell struck in an empty cathedral.

He'd forgotten. In all the chaos of waking up in Vincent's body, in this timeline, in this *life*, he'd somehow failed to remember that the Radio Demon had once been a man, broadcasting from some studio somewhere in this very moment.

And they wanted to bring him on their network.

Vox's hands clenched into fists, coffee dripping from his knuckles onto the tile.

The rage that bubbled up was familiar, comfortable, the same hot fury he'd carried for decades in Hell. Alastor, with his insufferable smile and his irritating personality and his absolute *refusal* to be controlled or commodified or *useful*. Alastor, who'd rejected every offer, every partnership, every attempt at collaboration.

If he could get to Alastor here, in this timeline, before the man died and went to Hell, before he became all powerful and untouchable...

Vox's thoughts spiraled, possibilities branching and multiplying faster than he could track them.

He could kill him. That was the obvious answer. Find out where Alastor lived, wait for the right moment, and just end it. Remove him from existence before he ever became a problem.

But what if he didn't have to kill Alastor himself? What if he could *use* him? The thought became clearer slowly, piece by piece.

Alastor was famous. Popular. Connected. If Vox could get close to him, if he could position himself as useful, as valuable, then maybe he could leverage that connection. Ride the man's coattails straight up the ladder. Use his popularity to boost his own profile.

Besides, this Alastor wasn't really similar to the one who had turned him down in the future... or the past? When they had met in hell, he'd been the newest and the most powerful overlord. But right now he was probably not nearly as cautious and on high alert. There was an opening here. A chance.

And then, later, when he was established, when he had power of his own...

Then he could figure out how to destroy him.

The thought sent a quiet current through his veins.

"Whittman!" A sharp voice from the hallway. "Are you cleaning that up or admiring it?!"

Vox blinked, pulled back to the present. The coffee had spread to the edges of the room, seeping under the cabinets.

"Coming!" he called back, grabbing a rag from under the sink.

He mopped up the mess mechanically, his mind still churning through scenarios and strategies.

Friday. The Starlight Room. An exclusive dinner where Alastor would be in attendance.

Vox needed to be there.

The problem was that he had no invitation, no reason to attend, and no legitimate way to insert himself into an event for executives and on-air talent.

Which meant he'd have to create one.

Vox wrung out the rag into the sink, watching the brown water swirl down the drain.

By the time he finished cleaning, his decision was made.

He was going to that dinner.

And he was going to meet Alastor.

Whatever it took.

Chapter 5

The secretary's name was Dorothy.

Vox knew this because he'd spent twenty minutes Thursday morning standing by the water cooler, pretending to be very interested in the contents of his coffee cup while eavesdropping on her conversation with one of the production assistants. Dorothy worked for Brennan. Dorothy had access to guest lists. Dorothy was, theoretically, his ticket to Friday's dinner.

The problem was that Dorothy looked at him the way most people looked at wallpaper.

"Mr. Brennan needs these filed by three," she said Thursday afternoon, not looking up from her typewriter as Vox approached her desk. Her fingers moved across the keys with mechanical precision, each strike punctuated by the aggressive ding of the carriage return.

"Of course," Vox said, his voice pitched to that careful frequency of helpfulness without desperation. "Actually, Miss... Dorothy, isn't it? I was wondering if I could ask you something."

The typing stopped.

She looked up at him with the flat, exhausted expression of someone who'd been interrupted one too many times that day. She was maybe thirty-five, with auburn hair pinned back so severely it looked painful and a mouth that seemed to exist in a permanent state of disappointment.

"If you're here to complain about the scheduling again, I already told Roger I can't move the afternoon slot."

"No, nothing like that." Vox set down the files she'd given him, careful to align them perfectly with the edge of her desk. "I was actually hoping to ask about Friday's dinner. The one at The Starlight Room?"

Dorothy's expression shifted from exhausted to suspicious. "What about it?"

"Well." Vox leaned against the desk, trying for casual and landing somewhere closer to awkward. "I understand it's quite the event. Industry networking, important contacts, that sort of thing. I was wondering if there might be... room for additional attendees?"

"You want to go to the network dinner." Her tone made it clear this was not a question.

"I think it would be valuable," Vox said, letting earnestness creep into his voice. "For my professional development. Understanding the industry landscape, meeting key figures in broadcasting. You know how important connections are in this business."

Dorothy stared at him for a long moment. Then she laughed, short and sharp as a bark.

"Mr. Whittman, the dinner is for executives, on-air talent, and their invited guests. Not..." She gestured vaguely at him. "Weathermen."

The dismissal stung more than it should have. Vox felt his jaw tighten, the familiar rage beginning to simmer beneath his skin. He forced it down, kept his expression pleasant and mildly confused.

"I understand the hierarchy," he said carefully. "But surely there must be exceptions? Someone who could bring a plus-one, perhaps?"

"Do you have a plus-one?"

"Not yet."

Dorothy's eyebrows rose. "Then I suggest you find one. Or better yet, focus on your actual job instead of trying to hobnob with people who won't remember your name five seconds after you introduce yourself."

She returned to her typing, each keystroke somehow conveying profound irritation.

Vox stood there for a moment, his hands clenched at his sides. The urge to say something cutting, something that would make her understand exactly how far beneath him she was, rose up hot and immediate.

Instead, he picked up the files. "Thank you for your time."

He walked away before she could respond, his footsteps measured and deliberate.

In the bathroom, he locked himself in a stall and stood there for five minutes, breathing through his teeth and imagining creative ways to ensure Dorothy would never speak to him in that way.

It didn't help.

- - -

Plan B emerged Thursday evening in the form of Margaret Holloway.

Margaret worked in advertising sales. She was attractive in a calculated way, with blonde hair that curled just so and red lipstick that matched her nails. More importantly, she'd been at the station for two years, had connections with several of the sponsors, and according to office gossip she was angling for a promotion to account manager.

She was exactly the kind of person who might have access to the network dinner.

Vox found her in the break room Friday morning, pouring herself coffee from the pot he'd carefully prepared an hour earlier. She wrinkled her nose at it but drank it anyway, which he took as a minor victory.

"Margaret," he said, approaching with what he hoped was a charming smile. "I wanted to thank you."

She turned, looking mildly surprised that he knew her name. "Thank me?"

"For your work on the Peterson account." Vox had no idea what the Peterson account was, but he'd overheard Sterling mentioning it yesterday with something approaching approval. "I heard it was quite the coup. Really impressive negotiations."

Margaret's expression softened slightly, surprise giving way to pleased suspicion. "You heard about that?"

"Hard not to when Sterling's actually complimentary about something." Vox let his smile turn conspiratorial. "He's not exactly generous with praise."

"That's the truth." She laughed, a practiced sound that was probably meant to be melodic. "The Peterson account was a nightmare. Their budget was tiny and they wanted premium slots. But I managed to convince them that consistent exposure was more valuable than prime time."

"Brilliant." Vox had no idea if it was brilliant or not. "That kind of strategic thinking, that's what separates the truly talented from the merely competent."

Margaret's smile widened. She leaned against the counter, angling her body toward him in a way that was probably meant to be inviting. "I don't think we've formally met. I'm Margaret."

"Vincent." He extended his hand. She took it, her grip surprisingly firm. "Vincent Whittman. I work in broadcasting. I do the weather segments."

"The weather segments." She said it the way someone might say sewage maintenance. "That must be... interesting."

"It's a starting point." Vox kept his tone light, self-deprecating. "Everyone has to begin somewhere, right? Although I have to admit, I'm hoping to move into more visible roles eventually. Build connections. Network with the right people."

"Networking is important," Margaret agreed. She was still holding his hand. He realized he should probably pull it back but wasn't sure if that would seem rude.

"Actually," he said, finally extracting his fingers from her grip, "speaking of networking, I heard there's an event tonight. Industry dinner? At The Starlight Room?"

Margaret's expression shifted, something calculating sliding behind her eyes. "The network dinner. Yes. I'm attending."

Vox's pulse jumped. "Are you? That's wonderful. I imagine it'll be quite the evening."

"It should be." She took a sip of her coffee, watching him over the rim of the cup. "Why do you ask?"

"Well." He let himself look slightly embarrassed, like he was working up courage. "I was hoping to attend myself. Professional development and all that. But it seems the guest list is rather exclusive."

"It is."

"And I thought..." He trailed off, as if the idea had just occurred to him. "I don't suppose you'd be bringing anyone? As a guest?"

Margaret set down her coffee cup. Her smile hadn't changed, but something in her posture had. "Are you asking me to take you as my plus-one, Vincent?"

The way she said his name made his skin crawl. There was something predatory in it, like she'd just realized she had leverage and was deciding how to use it.

"Only if it wouldn't be an imposition," Vox said, holding her gaze. "I wouldn't want to intrude on your evening."

"Oh, it wouldn't be an intrusion." Margaret moved closer, close enough that he could smell her perfume. Something floral and cloying that made his sinuses burn. "But I have to ask, what's in it for me?"

Vox blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"These dinners are about connections, Vincent. About being seen with the right people. You're a weatherman." She said it gently, almost kindly, which somehow made it worse. "No offense, but what value does bringing you add to my evening?"

The rage was back, hot and immediate. He wanted to explain exactly what value he could add, wanted to describe in precise detail all the ways he could make her regret that condescending tone. Instead, he forced his expression into something appropriately sheepish.

"I suppose you're right," he said. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"I'm not saying no." Margaret tilted her head, studying him. "But if you want me to spend my evening vouching for you, introducing you around... I'd need something in return."

"Like what?"

She smiled. It didn't reach her eyes. "There's a contract I'm working on. Big sponsor, very lucrative, but they're being difficult about terms. They want data, demographics, proof that our programming reaches their target audience. I need someone to pull those numbers for me. Detailed breakdowns by time slot, age group, geographic region. All properly formatted and ready to present by Monday morning."

Vox's mind raced through the logistics. "That would require access to the research department's archives."

"I'm sure a resourceful person could figure it out." She picked up her coffee cup again. "So what do you say, Vincent? You help me, I help you. That's how networking works, isn't it?"

The quid pro quo was so blatant it was almost insulting. She wanted him to do hours of tedious data compilation and analysis, work that would eat up his entire weekend, in exchange for the privilege of being her accessory at a dinner.

He wanted to tell her to go to hell.

Instead, he smiled. "That seems fair. I can have the report ready for you Monday morning."

"Wonderful." Margaret's smile turned genuine, or at least a more convincing facsimile of genuine. "Then I'd be happy to bring you tonight. I'll meet you at The Starlight Room at seven. Don't be late, and for God's sake, wear something decent. First impressions matter."

She left the break room, her heels clicking against the linoleum.

Vox stood there for a long moment, staring at the spot where she'd been.

Then he walked to the sink and poured out the rest of the coffee pot, watching the brown liquid spiral down the drain.

His hands were shaking.

He gripped the edge of the sink, knuckles white, breathing slowly through his nose until the urge to put his fist through the wall subsided.

This was humiliating. This was beneath him. Groveling to a middle-tier advertising executive, agreeing to do her grunt work just for the privilege of attending a dinner he should have been invited to on his own merit.

But it was also necessary.

He needed to be at that dinner. He needed to see Alastor, assess him, begin the careful process of positioning himself in the man's orbit.

And if that meant debasing himself in front of Margaret fucking Holloway, then that's what he'd do.

For now.

Vox straightened, adjusting his tie in the mirror above the sink. His reflection stared back at him, pale and unremarkable, wearing a cheap suit and an expression that tried very hard to look competent.

"Temporary," he told his reflection quietly. "This is all temporary."

His reflection didn't look convinced.

Chapter 6

By three o'clock, Vox had compiled Margaret's data.

He'd spent his lunch break which was unpaid in the research department, pulling files and cross-referencing demographic reports with viewing patterns. The work was tedious but not difficult, the kind of task that would have taken someone less familiar with information systems half a day. He finished it in ninety minutes.

He delivered the preliminary report to Margaret's desk at four, neatly typed and stapled, with a note explaining that the final version would be ready Monday as promised.

She barely glanced at it. "Good. Don't forget. Seven o'clock. Don't be late."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Vox said.

He left the building at five-thirty, walking quickly through the streets as the sun began to set behind the buildings. His apartment was a twenty-minute walk, which meant he had just over an hour to make himself presentable.

The suit hanging in his closet was the only decent piece of clothing Vincent owned. Dark gray, slightly worn at the elbows, but clean and pressed. He put it on carefully, checking his reflection in the small mirror above the sink.

He looked... fine. Adequate. Like exactly what he was: a low-level employee trying very hard to appear more important than he actually was.

The thought made his jaw clench.

He forced himself to breathe. Forced his expression to smooth into something neutral and pleasant.

This was reconnaissance. Information gathering. He didn't need to impress anyone tonight. He just needed to observe Alastor, learn what he could, and begin formulating a real plan.

By six forty-five, he was standing outside The Starlight Room, watching well-dressed people filter through the entrance. The building was all art deco glass and chrome, the kind of place that charged five dollars for a cocktail and considered it a bargain.

A doorman stood at the entrance, checking names against a list on a clipboard. Vox watched him turn away a couple who apparently weren't on the guest list, their protests dying under the weight of the man's professional indifference.

Seven o'clock came and went.

Vox shifted his weight, trying not to look like he was loitering. Around him, people continued to arrive in pairs and small groups, all of them dressed better than he was, all of them greeted by name as they passed through the doors.

Seven-fifteen.

Margaret still hadn't arrived.

Vox told himself she was just running late. Women took time to get ready. That was normal. Expected, even.

By seven-thirty, the flow of arrivals had slowed to a trickle.

By seven forty-five, it had stopped entirely.

Vox stood on the sidewalk, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, staring at the golden light spilling from the windows above. He could hear music now, faint but clear. Piano. Laughter. The murmur of conversation that meant the dinner had started.

She wasn't coming.

The realization settled over him slowly, like frost forming on glass.

Margaret had never intended to bring him. The whole thing had been a game. Get the errand boy to do her grunt work, promise him something he desperately wanted, and then simply... not show up. No consequences. No accountability. Just another Friday night where Vincent Whittman learned exactly how much he mattered.

Which was not at all.

Vox's breath came out in a thin stream of white in the cooling air. His jaw was clenched so tight his teeth ached.

He could go in anyway. Just walk up to the doorman, claim he was expected, force his way through if necessary.

Except he couldn't force his way through anything. He had no invitation, no name on the list, no legitimate reason to be there. And even if he somehow talked his way inside, what then? He'd be immediately identified as an intruder, thrown out, possibly reported to the station for attempted gate-crashing.

The humiliation would be absolute.

"You waiting for someone?" The doorman's voice cut through his thoughts.

Vox looked up. The man was watching him with the kind of polite suspicion reserved for people who'd been standing in one place too long.

"No," Vox heard himself say. "I was just leaving."

He turned and walked away, his footsteps echoing off the pavement.

The street was darker now, the sun fully set. Streetlamps cast pools of yellow light at regular intervals, and Vox walked through them mechanically, one after another, not really seeing where he was going.

His hands were shaking. Not just his hands. His whole body, a fine tremor that started somewhere deep in his chest and radiated outward until even his breathing felt unsteady.

He'd been played. Used. Dismissed like a servant who'd outlived his usefulness.

And there was nothing he could do about it.

That was the worst part. In Hell, if someone crossed him like this, there were options. Consequences. Violence, if necessary, or the threat of it. The knowledge that betrayal came with a price.

Here, he had nothing. No power. No leverage. No ability to even the score.

He found himself at a small park, barely more than a patch of grass with a few benches and a streetlamp. He sat down heavily, his elbows on his knees, staring at the ground.

Above him, the city hummed with life. Car horns in the distance. A radio playing somewhere, the sound drifting from an open window. People living their small lives, completely unaware that a former overlord was sitting on a park bench, defeated by a middle-tier advertising executive and her casual cruelty.

The laugh that bubbled up was bitter, almost painful.

This was his punishment, wasn't it? Not the mortal body with its limitations and weaknesses.

It was this. Being powerless. Being invisible. Being so far beneath notice that people could use him and discard him without a second thought.

"Live the life you squandered," the divine voice had said.

Was this the life he'd squandered? This pathetic existence where every small victory required degrading himself, where every opportunity was dangled just out of reach?

Vox pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes until he saw stars.

He'd been in this timeline for less than a week and he was already suffocating under the weight of his own insignificance.

The worst part was that Alastor was in that building right now. Twenty minutes away on foot. Close enough that Vox could have walked there, could have been in the same room, breathing the same air.

But he wasn't. Because he didn't matter enough to be let through the door.

A cat wandered past, pausing to look at him with green eyes that reflected the streetlamp. It meowed once, plaintive and questioning, then continued on its way when Vox didn't respond.

Even the cat had somewhere better to be.

Vox stood abruptly, the movement jerky and uncoordinated. He needed to move. Needed to do something, anything, before the rage and humiliation crystallized into something he couldn't control.

He walked. No destination in mind, just away. Away from The Starlight Room and its golden windows. Away from the sound of success happening without him.

The streets blurred together. Storefronts with their darkened windows. An all-night diner with a flickering neon sign. A group of men smoking outside a bar, their laughter loud and careless.

Vox kept walking until his feet ached and his breath came in short, harsh gasps.

When he finally looked up, he realized he'd walked in a wide circle. His apartment building loomed ahead, its brick facade dark and unwelcoming.

He climbed the stairs slowly, each step feeling like it required more effort than the last.

Inside, the apartment was exactly as he'd left it. The Murphy bed still pulled down. The fish tank still glowing faintly in the corner. The guppy still swimming its endless circles.

Vox stood in the doorway for a long moment, his hand still on the knob.

Then he stepped inside, closed the door, and locked it.

He didn't bother turning on the lights. Just walked to the armchair and sat down, staring at the fish tank in the darkness.

The guppy swam. Back and forth. Around and around. Going nowhere.

Vox understood the feeling.

His suit jacket still smelled faintly of the cologne he'd put on earlier, back when he'd thought tonight might actually lead somewhere. Now it just seemed ridiculous. Perfume on a corpse.

He should sleep. Tomorrow was Saturday. He had Margaret's report to finish, even though she'd never held up her end of the bargain. Because if he didn't finish it, she'd make sure everyone knew. Make sure his reputation, such as it was, got even worse.

The fair thing would be to not do it. To let her face the consequences of her own actions.

But fairness required power. And he had none.

So he'd finish the report. He'd hand it over Monday morning with a polite smile. And Margaret would take it without apology, without acknowledgment, because that's what people like her did to people like him.

The guppy bumped against the glass, its mouth opening and closing in that mindless way fish had.

"You're the lucky one," Vox told it quietly. "No ambitions. No memories of being something better. Just this."

The fish didn't respond. It never did.

Vox sat there in the darkness, watching it swim, until exhaustion finally pulled him under and sleep came as a mercy he hadn't earned.

Chapter 7

Vox woke up Saturday morning still wearing his suit.

The fabric was wrinkled, twisted around his torso in a way that had left deep creases across his chest. His mouth tasted like copper and old coffee, and there was a crick in his neck from sleeping in the armchair at an angle that no chiropractor would approve of.

He sat up slowly, his body protesting with the kind of general ache that suggested he was getting too old for this. Which was funny, because this body was quite young. In Hell, he hadn't felt physical discomfort in decades. Now every poor decision came with consequences written in muscle pain and joint stiffness.

The apartment was dim, morning light filtering weakly through the single window. The guppy was still swimming. Of course it was. The guppy would swim until it died, and then Vox would flush it down the toilet and that would be that.

He stood, stripping off the suit jacket and hanging it carefully over the back of the chair. The shirt was beyond salvaging - sweat-stained and creased - but the jacket could be brushed clean. Vincent couldn't afford to replace it.

The bathroom mirror showed him exactly what he expected: pale skin, dark circles under his eyes, brown hair sticking up at odd angles. He looked like shit. He felt like shit.

Good.

Anger was fuel. Humiliation was fuel. And right now, he had enough of both to power a small city.

He showered, the water pressure pathetic and the temperature fluctuating wildly between scalding and freezing. Vincent's apartment had exactly one setting: barely functional. He dried off with a thin towel that had seen better days and dressed in his weekend clothes - slacks and a button-down shirt that were presentable enough for public but not so nice they'd draw attention.

By eight-thirty, he was sitting at his kitchen table with Margaret's report spread out in front of him.

The preliminary version he'd given her yesterday was serviceable. The final version needed to be impeccable. Charts, graphs, demographic breakdowns organized by time slot and geographic region. She wanted data that would make her look competent in front of her sponsors, and by God, she was going to get it.

Not because she deserved it. Because Vox needed her to owe him something, even if she didn't know it yet.

He worked for two hours straight, his handwriting precise and his calculations exact. The numbers told a story: prime time slots pulled the highest ratings, but late-night programming had a dedicated audience with surprising purchasing power. The sponsors Margaret was courting would want to know that. Would want to know exactly which products to push during which shows.

By ten-thirty, the report was done. Twenty pages of meticulously organized information that would have taken someone less competent three days to compile.

Vox set down his pencil and stared at it.

The smart thing would be to throw the report in the trash. Let her fail. Let her scramble on Monday morning, looking incompetent in front of her sponsors, and maybe learn that actions had consequences.

But that would require Vox to have leverage. And he had none.

So he would give her the report. Smile politely when she took it without apology. And file away this particular betrayal in the growing list of debts that would eventually come due.

Eventually.

He slipped the report into a folder and set it aside.

Now for the real work.

- - -

The public library was a fifteen-minute walk from his apartment, a squat brick building that smelled like old paper and floor wax. Vox had been there twice before - once to get his library card, once to return a book Vincent had checked out weeks ago and forgotten about.

Today, he was here for research.

The librarian at the front desk was a woman in her fifties with graying hair pinned back in a bun and glasses that hung from a chain around her neck. She looked up as Vox approached, her expression the particular blend of helpful and exhausted that seemed universal to library staff.

"Good morning," Vox said, his voice pitched to that careful register of polite and professional. "I'm hoping you can help me with something."

"Of course." She smiled, the expression automatic but not unkind. "What are you looking for?"

"I work for the television station downtown," Vox said, letting a touch of pride creep into his voice. "We're putting together a comprehensive archive of local broadcasting history. Radio, television, the evolution of media in the area. I was hoping to access your newspaper archives? Particularly anything related to local radio personalities."

The librarian's expression brightened slightly. People loved being asked to help with official-sounding projects. It made them feel important.

"Oh, how interesting! Yes, we have archives going back to the twenties. They're on microfilm in the reference section. Do you have specific dates in mind, or...?"

"I'm focusing on the past five years," Vox said. "Particularly any mentions of radio programs, hosts, that sort of thing. I know it's broad, but I'm trying to be thorough."

"Well, the microfilm readers are in the back. I can show you how to use them, and if you need help finding specific editions, just let me know. We also have a card catalog for the newspaper index - it'll save you from scrolling through every page."

"That would be wonderful. Thank you so much, Miss...?"

"Mrs. Hendricks." She stood, gesturing for him to follow. "Come on, I'll get you set up."

Twenty minutes later, Vox was alone in the reference section, surrounded by boxes of microfilm and a reader that hummed softly as it projected grainy newspaper pages onto a small screen.

He started with the entertainment sections. Reviews, advertisements, program schedules. Anything that mentioned radio.

Alastor's name appeared within the first hour of searching.

"Local Radio Host Takes City by Storm," read a headline from three years ago. The article was brief, describing how a newcomer to the radio scene had quickly built a devoted following with his "magnetic personality" and "unparalleled stage presence." The accompanying photo showed a man in his thirties with dark hair and a smile that managed to be both charming and somehow unsettling.

Vox stared at the image for a long moment.

It was wrong. All wrong. This man looked... normal. Handsome, even, in that theatrical way that performers cultivated.

But the smile was the same.

Vox forced his gaze away from the photo and continued reading.

Alastor broadcast from a mid-sized radio station on the east side of the city. His show aired late night, ten PM to midnight, six days a week. The article mentioned his "sophisticated taste in music" and his "engaging commentary on current events." There were quotes from listeners describing him as "mesmerizing" and "unlike anyone else on the air."

Vox made mental notes. East side. Late night schedule.

He scrolled forward, looking for more mentions.

There were dozens. Alastor's popularity had grown steadily over the past three years. He'd been featured in society columns, photographed at charity events, interviewed about his "unique approach to broadcasting." One article from six months ago mentioned that he'd turned down offers from larger stations, preferring to maintain "creative control" over his program.

Of course he had. Alastor had never been interested in cooperation with others. He wanted full control. Autonomy. The freedom to do exactly what he wanted without interference.

Some things, apparently, were consistent across lifetimes.

Vox continued scrolling. The society pages were particularly useful - they documented Alastor's public appearances with the kind of breathless detail that suggested the man was treated like minor celebrity. A gala here, a dinner there, always photographed with the same enigmatic smile and impeccable clothing.

One photo caught Vox's attention. It was from last night.

"The Starlight Room Hosts Annual Broadcasting Industry Dinner," read the caption. The photo showed a crowded room, well-dressed people clustered around tables laden with food and wine. And there, in the background, was Alastor. He was speaking with someone Vox didn't recognize, his posture relaxed, his expression attentive.

Vox's jaw clenched.

Focus. He needed information.

He made note of everyone Alastor was photographed with. Names, faces, positions. The network executives who courted him. The sponsors who advertised during his show. The socialites who seemed to orbit him at public events.

One name appeared repeatedly: Jonathan Boucher, the owner of the radio station. The two were photographed together often, always with Boucher looking vaguely uncomfortable and Alastor looking supremely confident. Their body language in the photos was telling - Boucher deferred to Alastor in a way that suggested their relationship was less employer-employee and more... something else.

Vox filed that away. Useful, potentially.

By two in the afternoon, he'd compiled a mental dossier: Alastor's schedule, his known associates, his public persona, his habits. The man was visible when he wanted to be and invisible when he didn't. His public appearances were strategic, calculated to maintain his mystique while keeping him in the public eye.

It was impressive, in a frustrating sort of way.

Vox leaned back in his chair, staring at the microfilm reader's blank screen. He'd learned a lot, but nothing that directly helped him get close to Alastor. The man's private life remained exactly that - private. No home address, no mention of family, no personal details beyond his professional accomplishments.

He'd been hoping for something. An opening. A weakness.

Instead, he had confirmation that Alastor was exactly as untouchable here as he'd been in Hell.

"Finding everything okay?"

Vox looked up. Mrs. Hendricks stood at the end of the aisle, a stack of books in her arms.

"Yes, thank you," he said, his smile automatic. "This has been incredibly helpful. I can't believe how much coverage local radio gets in the papers."

"Oh, it's very popular," she said, setting down her books. "Especially that evening program. What's it called... the one with the charming host..."

"Alastor's show?" Vox supplied.

"Yes! That's the one." Her expression turned slightly dreamy. "My husband and I listen every night. That man has such a voice. And he's so well-spoken. Nothing like those loud, crass

programs some of the other stations run."

"You're a fan, then."

"Oh, very much so. He did a charity drive last month - raised money for the children's hospital. Spoke so beautifully about community responsibility. He's a real credit to the city."

Vox's smile didn't waver. "He sounds like quite a man."

"He is. Though I heard he's terribly private. Doesn't give interviews outside of professional contexts. Some people say he's shy, but I think he's just... selective. A man like that, he must get bothered constantly by admirers."

"I imagine so."

Mrs. Hendricks glanced at the microfilm reader. "Are you writing about him? For your archive project?"

"He'll definitely be included," Vox said. "Though I'm trying to get a comprehensive view of the whole industry. Don't want to focus too much on any one person."

"Well, if you do interview him, tell him the Hendricks family are devoted listeners." She smiled, collecting her books. "I'll let you get back to work."

She walked away, her footsteps soft on the library carpet.

Vox sat very still, staring at nothing.

Devoted listeners. Charity drives. Community responsibility.

The Radio Demon, civic-minded pillar of the community.

It was almost funny.

Almost.

- - -

By four o'clock, Vox had exhausted the newspaper archives. He returned the microfilm boxes to Mrs. Hendricks with profuse thanks and headed back out into the cooling afternoon air.

His stomach was growling - he hadn't eaten since breakfast - but food would have to wait. He had one more stop to make.

The grocery store was three blocks from his apartment, a small corner market that smelled like sawdust and overripe fruit. Vox grabbed a basket and moved through the aisles mechanically, picking up the cheapest versions of everything he needed. Bread, eggs, a can of soup, coffee that came in a tin and tasted like mud.

He was standing in front of the meat counter, staring at cuts of beef he couldn't afford, when he heard the voices.

"—can't believe he turned them down again." A woman's voice, low and gossipy. "That's what, the third station this year?"

"He knows what he's worth." A man, older, amused. "Why would he leave when they let him do whatever he wants?"

Vox glanced over. Two people in their forties, well-dressed, standing by the canned goods and talking in the animated way of people discussing local celebrities.

"Still," the woman continued, "imagine what he could do with a bigger platform. National reach, not just local. He could be famous."

"Maybe he doesn't want to be famous. Some people prefer being a big fish in a small pond."

"With that talent? That's a waste."

They moved on, their voices fading as they turned down another aisle.

Vox stood there, his hand still hovering over the packaged meat.

Everyone loved Alastor. Everyone had an opinion about him, a story about his show, a theory about his motivations. He was woven into the fabric of the city, a constant presence in the background of people's lives.

And Vox had known him in Hell.

The disconnect was dizzying.

Here, he was beloved. Admired. A local treasure. It was the greatest con Vox had ever seen.

He grabbed the cheapest pack of ground beef and continued shopping.

- - -

By the time he got back to his apartment, the sun was setting. Vox climbed the stairs slowly, his grocery bag in one hand.

The hallway on his floor was unusually busy. His neighbor from across the hall - the elderly woman who'd told him how to open his door - was standing outside her apartment with two other tenants, all of them talking loudly.

"—absolute nonsense," she was saying as Vox approached. "Raising rent by fifteen percent with two weeks' notice. Who do they think we are?"

"Can they even do that?" The man next to her, heavyset with a thick mustache, looked genuinely distressed. "Legally?"

"Apparently so. Mrs. Chen got the notice yesterday. We'll all be getting them by Monday, mark my words."

Vox slowed his approach. The woman noticed him and waved.

"Vincent! There you are. Have you heard about this rent situation?"

"I haven't," Vox said carefully. "What's happening?"

"The landlord's raising rent across the whole building. Fifteen percent, starting next month. Highway robbery, that's what it is."

The other woman - Mrs. Chen, presumably - shook her head. "I've lived here twelve years. Never missed a payment. And this is how they repay loyalty."

"It's criminal," Mustache Man agreed.

The first woman - Vox still didn't know her name - turned back to him. "Anyway, we're having cards tonight. Seven o'clock, my place. Penny poker, nothing fancy. You should join us. Might be the last time we're all here, the way things are going."

Vox's first instinct was to refuse. He had no interest in penny poker with his neighbors. He had research to do, plans to refine, strategies to develop.

But...

Vincent was supposed to be a normal person. Normal people played cards with their neighbors. Normal people made small talk and pretended to care about rent increases and building drama.

And Vox needed to practice being normal.

"That sounds nice," he heard himself say. "What should I bring?"

"Just yourself and whatever you're willing to lose." She grinned. "Seven o'clock. Don't be late."

- - -

Vox used the intervening time to eat something that technically qualified as dinner - scrambled eggs and toast - and to change into slightly more casual clothes. The key was to look relaxed but not sloppy. Like someone who'd made an effort but not too much effort.

At seven sharp, he knocked on Mrs. Kowalski's door.

The apartment was a mirror image of his own, but infinitely more lived-in. Furniture that had seen decades of use, walls covered in photographs and watercolor paintings, a radio playing

big band music at low volume. The air smelled like cigarettes and something baking - cookies, maybe, or bread.

"Come in, come in!" Mrs. Kowalski ushered him inside. "You know everyone, I think? Mrs. Chen, Mr. Griswold..."

The heavyset man with the mustache - Mr. Griswold - nodded at him. "Weather boy, right? From the television station?"

"That's me," Vox said, his smile easy and self-deprecating. "Although I'm barely on camera. Mostly I just draw the maps."

"Still counts." Mrs. Chen was already sitting at the card table, shuffling a worn deck with practiced efficiency. "Television's the future. My grandson's obsessed with it."

They settled around the table, and Mrs. Kowalski dealt the first hand.

Vox played carefully. Not too well, not too poorly. He won a hand early - pure luck, an inside straight that made Mr. Griswold curse good-naturedly - and then lost the next three in a row. The pennies clinked across the table, a rhythm that was almost soothing.

The conversation flowed around him. Complaints about the landlord. Gossip about other tenants. Discussion of rising food prices and whether the corner market was price-gouging.

Vox participated just enough to seem engaged, his responses carefully calibrated to match the tone. Sympathetic about the rent increase. Mildly interested in the gossip. Appropriately outraged about the price of milk.

It was easy. Almost too easy.

"Read about another murder in the paper yesterday," Mr. Griswold said during a lull in conversation, studying his cards. "Third one this month. Makes you wonder what the police are even doing."

"What kind of murder?" Mrs. Chen asked, her tone suggesting this was normal dinner conversation.

"Some businessman. Found in an alley near the theater district. Stabbed, apparently. Wallet was still on him, so it wasn't a robbery."

"Probably organized crime," Mrs. Kowalski said dismissively. "Those types are always killing each other over territory or debts or whatnot."

"The paper said there was no connection to criminal activity. Just a random victim." Mr. Griswold shook his head. "That's what's scary. Could happen to anyone."

"Random violence is rare," Vox said, his voice casual. Then, catching himself: "Or so I've heard."

Three sets of eyes turned toward him.

"I mean," he continued, his tone shifting to something more uncertain, more Vincent-like, "statistically, most murders are committed by someone the victim knows. Random killings are actually quite uncommon. I read that somewhere. Crime statistics or... something."

"You read a lot of crime statistics?" Mrs. Kowalski's tone was amused.

"I like detective novels," Vox said quickly. "Agatha Christie, that sort of thing. You pick up information."

"Hmm." She studied him for a moment, then returned her attention to her cards. "Well, detective novels or not, I'm keeping my door locked. Three murders in a month is three too many."

The conversation moved on.

Vox forced himself to breathe normally, to keep his expression neutral. He needed to be more careful. Vincent wouldn't know those details. Vincent wouldn't have memorized murder reports.

He played the next hand badly on purpose, losing with a weak pair against Mrs. Chen's three of a kind.

By nine-thirty, he'd lost approximately thirty cents and learned far more than he wanted to know about the building's plumbing problems.

"Same time next week?" Mrs. Kowalski asked as they gathered up the cards.

"If we're all still here," Mrs. Chen said darkly.

"We'll be here. That landlord's full of hot air. He tries this every few years and backs down when people push back." Mrs. Kowalski looked at Vox. "You'll come again, won't you? It's nice having young blood at the table. These two are terrible conversationalists."

"Hey!" Mr. Griswold protested.

Vox smiled. "I'd be happy to."

- - -

Back in his apartment, Vox locked the door and leaned against it, exhaling slowly.

That had been... fine. He'd played his role adequately. Maybe even well. The mask had held.

But it had taken effort. Constant, exhausting effort to monitor every word, every reaction, every microexpression. To be someone he wasn't.

He walked to the kitchen table and sat down, pulling out a piece of paper and a pencil.

For the next hour, he wrote. Everything he'd learned today about Alastor, organized into categories: Professional Life, Public Persona, Known Associates, Patterns and Habits. He included notes about the station's location, about the dinner at The Starlight Room, about the way people talked about Alastor with a mixture of admiration and fascination.

At the bottom, he wrote three options:

Option 1: Make myself indispensable at the station. Wait for Alastor to visit. Create "accidental" encounter.

Option 2: Find Alastor's patterns outside of work. Manufacture a meeting that seems coincidental.

Option 3: If all else fails - leverage what I know about his extracurricular activities.

He stared at the third option for a long moment.

The knowledge that Alastor was a serial killer was his ace in the hole. His insurance policy. The thing he could use if flattery and manipulation didn't work.

But he'd have to be very, very careful about how he played it.

Too direct, and Alastor would simply kill him. Too subtle, and the threat would be meaningless.

It was a tightrope walk. And Vox had never been particularly good at tightropes. Evidently.

He folded the paper and walked to the sink. Held it over the basin and struck a match, watching the flame catch and spread.

The paper curled and blackened, and Vox watched until there was nothing left but ash.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunday started the way most bad days started: with Vox waking up on the Murphy bed fully clothed, his mouth tasting like something had died in it, and the immediate, crushing awareness that he had nowhere to be and nothing to do.

The apartment looked neglected. Dishes piled in the sink, days worth of them, crusted with food that had fossilized into geological layers. His suit from Friday night was still crumpled on the armchair. The trash can was overflowing. The floor had developed a layer of grime that made his shoes stick slightly when he walked.

He sat up slowly, his spine protesting. Across the room, the guppy swam its endless circle.

"Morning," Vox said to it flatly.

The fish ignored him. Smart fish.

He checked the clock on the wall. Nine thirty in the morning. Which meant twelve and a half hours until...

The thought arrived unbidden, and Vox hated it immediately.

He wasn't counting down to anything. He was simply aware of the time because he was a professional who understood the value of industry awareness. Monitoring the competition. Understanding the landscape. This was research, nothing more.

The fact that he'd thought about it within thirty seconds of waking up meant absolutely nothing.

He stood, his joints cracking in a way that Vincent's young body had no business experiencing. The apartment was cold, the radiator having given up sometime during the night with a bang that had probably woken the entire floor.

Coffee. He needed coffee.

The percolator took fifteen minutes to produce something that technically qualified as a beverage. Vox stood at the kitchenette counter, watching it burble and spit, trying not to think about the broadcast tonight.

He thought about it anyway.

It was stupid. Irrational. He'd spent decades in Hell knowing exactly who Alastor was, what he was capable of, what made him dangerous. The Radio Demon didn't become an overlord by accident. He'd earned that title through blood and violence and a particular brand of theatrical cruelty that made other demons nervous.

But that was *later*. Future. A timeline that wouldn't exist for decades.

Right now, in this moment, Alastor was just some radio host. A local celebrity. Popular with lonely housewives and insomniacs who had nothing better to do than listen to a man with a nice voice talk about jazz music.

The disconnect was maddening.

Vox poured the coffee into a chipped mug and took a sip. It tasted burnt. He drank it anyway.

The newspaper was outside his door, soggy for some reason. *The paper boy probably got soaked in the morning rain,* he noted, though the thought barely registered. He brought it in, spreading it across the kitchen table, scanning the headlines with mechanical efficiency.

There. Page four. "Businessman Found Dead in Theater District."

Harold Williams, forty-two, discovered early Saturday morning by a janitor. Multiple stab wounds. Wallet and valuables untouched, ruling out robbery. Police had no suspects and were asking anyone with information to come forward.

Vox read the article twice, his coffee cooling in his hand.

Time of death estimated between midnight and two AM Friday. Last seen leaving a restaurant on Seventh Street around eleven. The body had been found in an alley three blocks away.

No witnesses. No evidence. Just another corpse and a lot of questions nobody would answer.

Vox set down the paper and stared at the wall.

Alastor had killed someone two nights ago. Had to be. Unless there was another murderer working the same area, which seemed unlikely. And tonight, he'd go on air and talk about jazz music and local events and absolutely nothing would suggest he'd recently stabbed a man to death in an alley.

The audacity of it was almost-

No. Not almost. It *was* galling. The sheer compartmentalization required to live two lives so completely separate, and to apparently be *succeeding* at it while Vox was stuck washing dishes and fetching coffee.

He found himself studying the article more closely. The location. The timing. The method.

This was data. If he was going to use Alastor - and he was, he had to, it was the only path forward that made any sense - then he needed to understand the pattern. The hunting grounds. The selection criteria. The cooling-off period between kills.

Vox stood, walked to the kitchen drawer, and pulled out the stack of newspapers he'd been saving. Not for any particular reason. Vincent just hadn't thrown them out, and Vox had been too busy to care about the growing pile.

Now he spread them across the table and started searching.

It took twenty minutes to find the previous murder. Thomas Brown, fifty-one, found dead in the Warehouse District. That was... Vox checked the date. Four months ago.

Four months between kills?

That seemed... inefficient.

He kept searching. Found another one. Robert Mitchell, thirty-eight, Financial District. Seven months before that.

Vox stared at the three articles, his brow furrowing.

Seven months. Four months. Two days ago.

That wasn't a pattern. That was chaos. Random intervals, random locations, seemingly random victims. A businessman, a warehouse manager, an accountant. No obvious connection between them. No clear hunting ground. No predictable timeline.

This was sloppy. Amateurish, even. Any competent killer knew you needed a system. A method. Something reproducible that kept you ahead of the investigators while still satisfying the urge.

Vox had killed his first victim nine months into his career at the television station. A rival weatherman who'd been angling for the same promotion. He'd planned it for three weeks. Studied the man's routine. Found the perfect window of opportunity.

And the cops had shown up at his door thirty six hours later.

Not with an arrest warrant. Just questions. Routine interviews with everyone who knew the deceased. But Vox had seen the way the detective watched him, the careful attention paid to every word, every microexpression. He'd played his part perfectly. He acted shocked, saddened, helpful, and they'd eventually moved on.

But it had been close. Too close. A learning experience in exactly how much scrutiny even a "perfect" crime attracted.

He'd adjusted his methods after that. Longer cooling periods. Better victim selection. More careful disposal of evidence. Made all of his murders look like freak accidents. He'd gotten *good* at it. Professional.

And Alastor's method was... what? Kill whenever the mood struck? Hope for the best?

Unless...

Vox stared at the dates again.

Unless Alastor *had* attracted scrutiny. Maybe early on, like Vox had. Maybe the irregular timing wasn't chaos but extreme caution. Killing only when he was absolutely certain he could get away with it. Waiting months between murders not out of lack of desire but out of paranoid discipline.

That would actually be... smart. It would suggest Alastor had either gotten very lucky or was much better at this than Vox wanted to admit.

Well of course he is, a bitter voice in Vox's head supplied. *He's not caught, is he? He's out there being beloved by the public while you're in here piecing together his murders from newspaper scraps like a deranged conspiracy theorist.*

Vox grabbed the newspapers and shoved them back into their pile with more force than necessary.

This was supposed to be reconnaissance. Information gathering. Strategic analysis.

Instead it was just making him angry.

He looked at the clock. Still ten hours until the broadcast.

- - -

By noon, the report for Margaret was done... again. Twenty-three pages of flawless data, already finished, now only receiving the unnecessary polish that no one would ever notice. He slipped it into a folder and left it by the door, so he wouldn’t forget it Monday morning.

Then he had nothing to do.

He tried to read. Picked up one of Vincent's books from the shelf, some mystery novel about a detective solving murders on a train. He made it three pages before the detective did something so monumentally stupid that Vox threw the book across the room.

"The murderer is obviously the conductor," he said to the empty apartment. "It's always the person with access to all the cars. This is basic logic."

The book hit the wall and fell behind the armchair. Vox didn't retrieve it.

He paced instead. Three steps to the wall, turn, three steps back.

The clock read one fifteen.

"This is pathetic," he said aloud. "You're being pathetic."

The guppy, as always, had no opinion.

But it wasn't pathetic. It was *practical*. He needed to understand Alastor's public persona to manipulate him effectively. Needed to hear how he presented himself, what mask he wore, what lies he told so convincingly that an entire city bought them.

Vox stopped pacing and stared at the radio. It sat on its crate in the corner, silent and dark, just a box of electronic parts and wires. Inert. Meaningless. But at ten o'clock tonight, Alastor's voice would come through those speakers, and every person in the city with a radio would be listening.

Everyone including Vox, apparently.

He walked to the sink and splashed cold water on his face. The water was brown for the first few seconds, the pipes coughing up rust, then cleared to something almost transparent. He scrubbed his face hard, using the rough edge of a dish towel to dry off.

His reflection in the small mirror above the sink looked haggard.

"Pull yourself together," he told his reflection.

His reflection looked unconvinced.

- - -

The afternoon crawled by at a snail's pace. Vox tried to organize his mental notes about Alastor, but he kept circling back to the same infuriating questions. How did the man do it? How did he maintain such a squeaky-clean public image while allegedly stabbing people in alleys? Where was the cognitive dissonance? The slip-ups? The tiny cracks in the facade?

There had to be something. Everyone made mistakes.

Except apparently Alastor didn't.

Which meant either he was genuinely that good, or Vox was missing something obvious.

Both options were equally infuriating.

The clock read four thirty.

Five and a half hours.

He needed to eat something. His stomach was making noises that suggested it was considering digesting itself. He opened the icebox and stared at its contents with the enthusiasm of a man facing execution.

Eggs. Bread. A can of soup. The ground beef he'd bought yesterday, which was probably still good. Hopefully.

He made scrambled eggs because they required minimal effort. They came out dry and rubbery, sticking to the pan. He ate them standing at the counter, chewing mechanically, tasting nothing.

The sun was setting. Orange light slanted through the window, painting the wall in shades of amber and rust. It was almost pretty. Almost enough to make the apartment look like something other than a glorified cell.

Seven o'clock.

Vox looked at the disaster zone that was his living space. The dishes. The trash. The general film of grime that had accumulated over the last few days.

He couldn't sit still for three more hours. His skin was crawling, his thoughts racing in circles that led nowhere productive. He needed to move, needed to do something with his hands before he started screaming or breaking things.

Fine. He'd clean.

Not because the apartment needed it, though it desperately did. Not because he cared about hygiene or order or any of that domestic nonsense. But because physical labor was better than sitting in the armchair staring at a silent radio like some obsessed lunatic.

He started with the dishes.

The water ran cold for five minutes before grudgingly warming to lukewarm. Vox scrubbed plates with vicious efficiency, the steel wool scouring away dried food with a sound like grinding teeth.

This was his apartment. His mess. His pathetic little life.

The unfairness of it bubbled up hot and acidic. He'd built empires. He'd controlled entire networks. He'd held the attention of millions, commanded respect and fear in equal measure. And now he was washing dishes in a one-room apartment, counting down the hours until he could listen to some radio hack who'd somehow managed to be more successful at murder than Vox had ever been at anything in this timeline.

A plate slipped from his grasp and shattered in the sink with a harsh crash.

Vox stared at the broken pieces, chest heaving. His hands trembled not from fear, but from pure, simmering rage.

He carefully picked out the shards and dropped them in the trash. Then he continued washing, his movements precise and controlled. Each dish cleaned with methodical perfection. Each surface scrubbed until it gleamed.

Control. He still had control over this, at least.

By seven thirty, the dishes were done. The sink was clean. The counter was wiped down.

The apartment still looked terrible.

Vox grabbed the broom from the closet and started sweeping. The floor was disgusting, layers of dust and grime that had built up over weeks. The broom pushed it into small piles that he swept into the dustpan with sharp, aggressive strokes.

He found things as he cleaned. A button from one of Vincent's shirts. A penny that had rolled under the icebox. A small gear from something mechanical - a watch, maybe, that Vincent had tried to repair and abandoned.

Vox picked up the gear and turned it over in his fingers. The metal was tarnished, the teeth slightly worn. Something that had once been part of a functioning whole, now just debris.

He threw it in the trash and continued sweeping.

Eight o'clock.

He emptied the trash, the bag heavy with days worth of garbage. The hallway was empty, thankfully. He didn't want to make small talk with Mrs. Kowalski or listen to Mr. Griswold complain about rent increases.

Back inside, he locked the door and surveyed his progress.

Better. Not good, but better. The floor's original color was visible now. The surfaces were clean. The air smelled less like decay and more like the harsh soap he'd used on everything.

Eight thirty.

Vox wiped down the kitchen table, the armchair, the windowsill. Dust came away in gray streaks on the rag. He moved methodically, not thinking, just cleaning.

Nine o'clock.

The apartment was starting to look almost habitable. You could almost imagine a person living here with dignity instead of slowly rotting.

Vox stood in the center of the room, slightly out of breath, his shirt damp with sweat.

One hour.

He stripped off his shirt and washed up in the bathroom, scrubbing the sweat away with cold water. His reflection looked marginally more human. Still tired. Still irritated. But at least clean.

He put on a fresh shirt. Not because he was trying to look presentable for a radio broadcast no one would see him listening to. Just because the other one was dirty.

Then he walked to the radio and stared at it.

Just a box. Just wood and metal and wires.

He turned it on.

The radio hummed to life, tubes warming with that familiar electronic whine. Static crackled through the speakers, then resolved into music. Some big band number, bright and cheerful, completely at odds with Vox's mood.

He sat down in the armchair. The clock on the wall read nine forty-five.

Fifteen minutes.

The music continued. Some advertisement came on, a woman's voice excitedly listing the virtues of a new laundry soap. Vox barely heard it. His attention was locked on the radio, on the seconds ticking by.

This was it. He'd finally hear what made Alastor so special. What made him so beloved. What made him successful enough that network executives were falling over themselves to court him while Vox fetched their coffee.

Nine fifty-eight.

He was going to analyze every word. Every inflection. Every theatrical pause. He was going to dissect this broadcast like a biology student with a frog, and by the end of it he'd understand exactly what made Alastor tick.

Nine fifty-nine.

The music began to fade, volume dropping as someone adjusted levels in the studio.

Ten o'clock.

Then he heard it.

"Good evening, dear listeners."

The voice was smooth, warm, professional. Normal, almost painfully so.

"I hope this Sunday evening finds you well and comfortable," Alastor continued, his tone carrying the practiced ease of someone who did this every night. "Perhaps you're settling in after a long weekend. Perhaps you're preparing for the week ahead. Or perhaps, like me, you're simply enjoying these quiet evening hours with good music and better company."

There was a smile in the voice. Pleasant. Inviting. The kind of warmth that made you feel like he was talking directly to you.

Vox stared at the radio.

That was it? That was the opening?

"We have a wonderful program lined up for you tonight," Alastor said. "Some magnificent jazz from the incomparable Louis Armstrong, a few thoughts on the changing season, and of course, your letters. I always enjoy hearing from you, dear listeners. Your insights and stories make this program what it is."

More music swelled in the background. Something smooth and melodic.

"But first, let's begin with this lovely piece from Duke Ellington's orchestra..."

The music took over, and Vox continued to stare.

Where was the menace? The hidden meanings? The theatrical danger?

This was... this was just a radio show. A perfectly normal, completely unremarkable radio show hosted by a man who sounded like he'd never had a dark thought in his life.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Vox said to the radio.

The radio did not respond.

Vox turned to the fish tank. "Are you hearing this? This is what everyone's obsessed with? *This?"*

The guppy swam in its circle, unimpressed.

The music continued for three minutes before Alastor's voice returned.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" he said, his tone full of genuine-sounding appreciation. "Duke Ellington has such a gift for melody. It's no wonder his orchestra continues to captivate audiences across the country."

A pause.

"You know, I was reading an article the other day about the evolution of jazz music. How it's grown from its roots in New Orleans to become this sophisticated art form we enjoy today. The progression is really quite fascinating. The way musicians build on what came before, adding their own innovations, their own interpretations..."

"Oh, here we go," Vox muttered. "The intellectual commentary. Very impressive. You can read articles."

"...and I think that's true of any art form, really," Alastor continued, oblivious to Vox's commentary. "We're all building on foundations laid by those who came before us. Taking what worked, discarding what didn't, adding our own unique touches. It's a form of evolution, isn't it? Adaptation and improvement over time."

"Fascinating," Vox said flatly to the guppy. "He's discovered the concept of artistic progress. Someone alert the newspapers."

"But I'm getting philosophical," Alastor said with a small chuckle. "Let's move on to something more immediate. I have a letter here from Mrs. Dorothy Henderson of Maple Street. She writes: 'Dear Alastor, I've been listening to your program for two years now, and I wanted to tell you how much your music selections have meant to me during a difficult time...'"

Vox listened as Alastor read the letter in full, his voice sympathetic and engaged, responding to Mrs. Henderson's struggles with genuine-sounding compassion.

"Thank you for sharing that with us, Mrs. Henderson," Alastor said when he finished. "And I'm so glad the music has brought you some comfort. That's the power of it, isn't it? The way a good song can lift our spirits or soothe our troubles. It's a gift we can all share."

"Oh, how touching," Vox said to the empty apartment. "The serial killer has empathy. I'm sure Mrs. Henderson would be thrilled to know that the man consoling her about her dead husband is currently averaging point-three murders per month."

The broadcast continued. More music. Some commentary about upcoming local events. A humorous anecdote about a mishap at the radio station involving a spilled cup of coffee and a important sponsor's shoes. Alastor told the story with self-deprecating charm, making himself the butt of the joke.

The audience probably loved it. The famous radio host, so down-to-earth and relatable.

Vox wanted to put his fist through the radio.

"Weather's supposed to be mild this week," Alastor was saying now. "Perfect autumn weather. Not too hot, not too cold. Ideal for evening walks, if that's your sort of thing. Personally, I find there's something peaceful about a nighttime stroll. The city takes on a different character after dark. Quieter. More intimate."

Vox's jaw clenched.

Was that a hint? Was he talking about his hunting grounds? Or was it just innocuous small talk about the weather?

The problem was it could be either. Or both. Or neither.

"Now then," Alastor said, his voice brightening, "let's return to the music. This next piece is one of my personal favorites. Benny Goodman's orchestra, performing 'Sing, Sing, Sing.' I guarantee it'll have you tapping your feet..."

The music swelled, energetic and vibrant, and Vox continued to glare at the radio.

Twenty minutes into the broadcast and he'd learned exactly nothing useful. Alastor was charming, professional, engaging, and completely opaque. There was no bleeding through of his real nature. No cracks in the facade. No hidden messages or dark humor that suggested what he really was.

It was a *performance*. And a flawless one.

Which meant Alastor was either much better at this than Vox had given him credit for, or...

Or Vox was an idiot for expecting anything else.

Of course there wouldn't be hints. *Of course* Alastor wouldn't drop clever little breadcrumbs about his extracurricular activities. He wasn't a character in a badly written mystery novel. He was a real person who'd been successfully hiding his true nature for years.

If he was obvious about it, he'd be in prison right now.

The realization settled over Vox with strange clarity.

He'd been expecting the Radio Demon. The theatrical overlord who reveled in his reputation, who *wanted* people to know what he was capable of.

But that was Hell. That was later. After death, after consequences stopped mattering.

Right now, Alastor was human. Fragile. Subject to laws and police and execution. Of *course* he was careful. Of *course* he maintained perfect separation between his public and private selves.

It was basic survival.

It was exactly what Vox himself had done.

And somehow, Alastor was doing it better.

"...wonderful response to last week's question about favorite autumn activities," Alastor was saying when Vox tuned back in. "It seems many of you enjoy apple picking. I must admit, there's something delightful about a fresh apple pie, isn't there? My mother used to make the most wonderful pies..."

He launched into a story about his childhood, his mother's baking, the smell of cinnamon and nutmeg filling the kitchen. It was wholesome and nostalgic and *obviously* calculated to make him seem like a normal person with normal memories and normal feelings.

"Your mother probably knew what you were," Vox muttered. "I bet she had that look. That 'I love my son but something's wrong with him' look. I bet she tried to pray it away."

"...and I suppose that's why autumn remains my favorite season," Alastor concluded warmly. "It reminds me of simpler times. Family. Home. The comfort of familiar traditions."

"Oh, spare me," Vox said to the guppy. "Get a load of this asshole."

But Alastor was already moving on to the next song, his voice smooth and professional as he introduced a piece by Billie Holiday.

The broadcast continued for another hour. More music, more letters from listeners, more cheerful commentary about local events and seasonal changes. Alastor laughed at appropriate moments, sounded thoughtful during the more serious segments, and maintained that perfect balance of entertaining and informative that apparently made him so popular.

Vox sat through all of it, his irritation growing with each passing minute.

There was nothing to analyze. Nothing to dissect. Nothing to use.

Just a man doing his job exceptionally well.

By eleven forty-five, Alastor’s closing remarks were finally underway.

"Well, dear listeners, I'm afraid that's all the time we have tonight," he said, and there was uncharacteristic warmth in his voice. Like he was actually sad to be signing off. "Thank you so much for spending your evening with me. I hope the music brought you some joy, and I look forward to speaking with you again tomorrow night."

A pause.

"Until then, take care of yourselves. Goodnight."

The station's closing music began to play, and Vox sat in his armchair, staring at the radio.

That was it. Two hours of his life spent listening to the most aggressively normal radio program he'd ever heard. No dark undertones. No hidden meanings. No glimpse whatsoever of the monster underneath.

Just Alastor, beloved radio host, friend to lonely housewives and insomniacs everywhere.

Vox stood abruptly and walked to the window. The street below was mostly dark, a few streetlamps casting pools of yellow light. Somewhere out there, Alastor was probably going home. Maybe walking through those quiet streets he'd mentioned. Maybe already planning his next kill.

Or maybe he was genuinely just going home to sleep like a normal person.

That was the worst part. Vox couldn't tell. Couldn't see the seams. Couldn't find a single crack in the facade.

And if he couldn't find it from the safety of his apartment, listening to a broadcast, how the hell was he supposed to find it in person?

He turned back to the room. The guppy was still swimming. The radio was playing station filler music. His apartment was clean for the first time in days.

And Vox was no closer to a plan than he'd been this morning.

"He's so overrated," Vox said aloud. "Once I take over his station I'm firing him first."

The guppy, wisely, said nothing.

Chapter End Notes

If you saw me post this chapter few hours ago, no you didn’t. I accidentally posted without the second half. If you already read it, I’d recommend giving it another look. The rest is there now. Ta-ta~

Chapter 9

The coffee machine was making that dying whale sound again.

Vox stood in the breakroom Monday morning, watching brown liquid dribble into the pot with all the enthusiasm of blood from a corpse. His reflection in the chrome surface of the machine looked exactly how he felt: pale, slightly manic, running on four hours of sleep and pure spite.

He'd spent Sunday night after the broadcast lying awake, staring at the ceiling, replaying every word of Alastor's show in his head. The performance had been flawless. Aggressively, insultingly flawless. And Vox had learned absolutely nothing useful except that the man loved talked about apple pie on the radio.

The realization had not improved his mood.

But today was Monday. Today he had a job to do. And that job involved handing Margaret Holloway a report she didn't deserve while smiling like it didn't bother him at all.

The coffee finished brewing. Vox poured himself a cup, added two sugars, and headed into the newsroom.

The Monday morning atmosphere was exactly as oppressive as he'd expected. The clatter of typewriters, the haze of cigarette smoke, the general sense of people who'd rather be anywhere else doing anything else. Sterling's door was closed, which meant he was either on a call or nursing a hangover. Probably both.

Vox walked past the rows of desks, the folder containing Margaret's report tucked under his arm. He'd printed it on the good paper, the kind reserved for client presentations. Had bound it with a binder clip instead of staples because it looked more professional. Had even included a table of contents and an appendix with supplementary data.

It was the kind of work that should have taken a team of researchers a full week. He had done it in a weekend, which only confirmed what he already knew: he was operating on an entirely different level than everyone else in the building.

Margaret's desk was in the far corner, near the windows. As Vox approached, he could see she was on the phone, her back to him, gesturing with one hand while the other held the receiver. Her desk was a disaster. Lipstick stained napkins crumpled next to her typewriter. Files stacked haphazardly, some of them sliding off the edge. A half eaten pastry balanced on top of what looked like important correspondence.

The contrast between her workspace and the pristine folder in Vox's hand was almost artistic.

He waited. Politely. Like a good little employee who knew his place.

Margaret laughed at something the person on the other end said. Still didn't turn around.

Vox cleared his throat.

She waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. Not at him specifically. Just at the general concept of someone bothering her. Her fingers flicked toward a pile of papers on the corner of her desk, already sliding toward the trash can underneath.

Put it there, the gesture said. *With the rest of the garbage.*

Vox's jaw clenched. His fingers tightened on the folder, bending the edge slightly.

He very carefully smoothed the folder flat. Set it down on top of the indicated pile. Watched it immediately start to slide toward the floor.

Margaret was still talking. "Yeah, I finally got the numbers done. Took all weekend."

Vox stopped walking.

His hand was on the corner of someone's desk, steadying himself. The person at the desk, a typist whose name he didn't know, glanced up at him with mild curiosity.

"Took all weekend," Margaret repeated, laughing. "But I got it finished. Miller Brothers are going to love it."

The typist was still looking at him. Vox realized his expression had frozen into something that probably didn't look friendly.

He smiled. The typist quickly looked away.

Vox turned and walked back toward the breakroom, his footsteps measured and even. His hands, at his sides, were clenched into fists so tight his nails were cutting half moons into his palms.

She didn't just need to fail. She needed to be obliterated.

And she would be.

If his plan went accordingly.

The water cooler sat just outside the conference room where Margaret would be doing her presentation in approximately fifteen minutes. Vox had spent his entire walk to work this morning timing the route, checking sight lines, making sure everything would be perfect.

Now he stood there, carefully arranging coffee cups on top of the cooler. Six of them, all clean, all perfectly aligned. The kind of task that looked productive but was really just an excuse to loiter.

Through the half open conference room door, he could see Sterling pacing. Two men in gray suits sat at the table, both of them looking like they'd rather be anywhere else. The Miller Brothers. Regional appliance magnates. Old money, old fashioned, the kind of men who thought a firm handshake meant more than actual data.

They also, according to office gossip, had zero patience for incompetence.

Margaret swept past him at exactly nine fifteen, carrying his report like it was a prop in a play she hadn't rehearsed for. She didn't look at him. Didn't acknowledge him. Just walked into the conference room and closed the door most of the way.

Not all the way.

Vox picked up one of the coffee cups and examined it, as if checking for spots. Held it up to the light. Set it down. Picked up another one.

Through the gap in the door, he could hear Margaret's voice. Confident. Bright. Using words like "synergy" and "demographic optimization" with the easy fluency of someone who'd memorized them phonetically without understanding what they meant.

One of the Miller Brothers, the older one with the impressive mustache, lit a cigar. The smell drifted through the door. Sharp. Expensive.

Margaret was flipping through pages. Vox couldn't see her face but he could hear the paper rustling. She was reading the section headers. Just the headers. Skipping all the actual data because she didn't understand any of it.

"The afternoon programming block shows significant potential," she was saying. "Our research indicates strong viewer engagement across key demographics."

That was verbatim from page three. She was reading it word for word.

Sterling made a noise that might have been approval or might have been indigestion.

The younger Miller Brother leaned forward. "What about Q4 projections? Specifically the afternoon block?"

Silence.

Vox picked up another coffee cup. Held it. Waited.

The silence stretched. Five seconds. Ten. The clock on the wall ticked with aggressive loudness.

Margaret cleared her throat. "The projections are... standard growth."

"Standard growth." The older Miller Brother's voice was flat. "Meaning what, exactly?"

More paper rustling. Frantic now. The sound of someone flipping through pages they hadn't actually read.

"Well, the... the seasonal adjustments suggest..." Margaret's voice had lost its confidence. "That is, when you factor in the... the..."

"Miss Holloway." The younger brother's tone was the kind of polite that actually meant are you serious right now. "Do you have specific numbers or not?"

"I..." More rustling. A page tore slightly, the sound sharp in the quiet room. "The data is all here, I just need to..."

Sterling's chair scraped. Vox imagined him leaning forward, his face doing that thing where it turned colors.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

The silence was agonizing and Vox was enjoying every second of it.

Then the younger Miller Brother, with the patience of a man who'd sat through too many bad presentations, said, "Let me ask again. Q4 projections. Afternoon block. What are the numbers?"

Margaret's voice cracked slightly. "I... it's in the appendix, I believe..."

That was Vox's cue.

He picked up the coffee tray. Six cups, perfectly arranged. Walked to the conference room door and nudged it open with his shoulder.

All eyes turned to him.

"Excuse me," he said softly. "I thought you might want fresh coffee. It just finished brewing."

Sterling looked ready to tell him to get out. But the older Miller Brother gestured toward the table with his cigar.

"That'd be fine, son."

Vox entered. Set the tray down. Started pouring, beginning with the sponsors. The older brother first, then the younger. Then Sterling, who looked like he needed it.

Margaret was standing at the head of the table, the report open in front of her, her face slowly turning the color of a boiled lobster.

The younger Miller Brother repeated his question, his tone suggesting this was absolutely the last time he was going to ask. "Q4 projections. Afternoon block."

Margaret opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

Vox poured her coffee last, his movements careful and precise. "I believe that's covered in Appendix C," he said, his voice still soft. Helpful. Like he was just trying to assist his colleague. "The washing machine campaign specifically. The data suggests the target demographic, housewives aged twenty five to forty, are most receptive during the two PM time slot. That's when children are typically napping and mothers have the time and attention for longer advertisements."

The room went very still.

The older Miller Brother looked at Vox. Really looked at him, his eyes sharp and assessing. Then he flipped to the back of the report. His finger traced down the page.

"He's right." His mustache twitched. "It's all detailed right here. Specific numbers, timing recommendations, even suggested ad copy themes."

The younger brother was also looking at the appendix now. "This is excellent work. Very thorough."

Sterling's expression shifted through several emotions in rapid succession. Confusion. Realization. Horror.

Margaret stood frozen, the report still open in front of her.

"Miss Holloway." Sterling's voice was carefully controlled. "Why don't you go check on the ad copy for the evening lineup. I think we can handle things here."

It wasn't a suggestion.

Margaret's face went from red to white. She looked at Vox, just once, and the expression in her eyes was pure hatred mixed with the dawning awareness that she'd just been completely outmaneuvered.

She gathered up the report. Left without a word. The door closed behind her with a soft click that somehow sounded very final.

Vox stood there, coffee pot in hand, waiting.

The older Miller Brother gestured to the empty chair. "You wrote this report."

It wasn't a question.

"I compiled the research, yes sir," Vox said. His tone was modest but not servile. "Miss Holloway provided the direction."

"Direction." The younger brother snorted. "Son, I've been in advertising for twenty years. I can tell the difference between someone who did the work and someone who's taking credit for it."

Sterling was sweating now, his collar suddenly too tight.

"This research is thorough and that is putting it mildly." The older brother was reading through the appendix more carefully now. "The demographic breakdowns here are exceptional. And this analysis of listening patterns by time of day..."

His brother nodded. "The seasonal adjustment projections too. Most people wouldn't think to factor in school schedules affecting household routines. But you did."

"It seemed relevant," Vox said. He was very carefully keeping his voice level, but something was building in his chest. Something warm and bright and almost electric.

They were looking at him. Really seeing him. Recognizing his intelligence, his competence, his value.

He'd almost forgotten what this felt like.

"Sterling." The older Miller Brother set down the report and fixed his gaze on the station manager. "Why didn't you just have this young man do the presentation from the start? If he wrote the damn thing, he'd actually be able to answer our questions."

Sterling's mouth opened and closed. He looked like a fish drowning in air.

"I... that is... organizational protocol..."

"Protocol." The younger brother cut him off. "We're potentially committing fifty thousand dollars to your station's advertising slots. I don't care about protocol. I care about competence."

He turned to Vox. "Walk us through the afternoon block strategy. All of it."

And just like that, the dynamics of the room shifted.

Vox set down the coffee pot. Pulled out the chair. Sat down.

The report was in front of him, open to the section he'd spent six hours perfecting. Every number, every projection, every recommendation was burned into his memory.

He began to speak.

His voice was different now. Still professional, still courteous, but with an undercurrent of confidence that he hadn't let himself use since waking up in this timeline. The voice of someone who knew exactly what he was talking about and didn't need to apologize for it.

"The afternoon block presents unique opportunities," he said, his fingers moving across the page to specific data points. "Traditional advertising wisdom suggests morning or evening prime time, but the demographic research shows something interesting. Households with children have distinct patterns. The two to four PM window is when mothers are most receptive to advertising, particularly for household appliances."

The Miller Brothers were leaning in now, actually engaged.

Vox continued. "Your washing machine line, specifically, targets efficiency and reliability. The mothers listening during afternoon hours are your exact market. They're thinking about household tasks, managing schedules, looking for solutions. That's when your message has the most impact."

"What about frequency?" the younger brother asked. "How often should we run the spots?"

"Daily consistency builds familiarity," Vox said without hesitation. "But I'd recommend concentrating buys on Tuesday through Thursday. Mondays are still recovering from the

weekend. Fridays, people's attention is already shifting to non household concerns. The middle of the week is when routine household decisions are being made."

He flipped to another page. "I've included a sample schedule here. Fifteen second spots during the afternoon block, with longer form sixty second advertisements during your sponsored programming segments. The combination gives you both brand awareness and detailed product information."

The older Miller Brother was actually smiling now, his cigar forgotten in the ashtray. "This is exactly the kind of strategic thinking we needed. Not just throwing advertisements at a wall and hoping something sticks."

His brother nodded enthusiastically. "And the seasonal adjustments?"

"Back to school season is your strongest period," Vox said, warming to the subject. He could feel his posture changing, his gestures becoming more animated. This was what he was good at. This was what he'd spent decades perfecting. Reading audiences, understanding patterns, knowing exactly how to capture and hold attention.

"September through October, you'll see a spike in household purchasing. New routines, new schedules, mothers reassessing their household systems. That's when you want your maximum presence. Then December, holiday season, major appliance purchases as gifts. January, New Year's resolutions about home improvement. February and March, slower. You can reduce frequency, maintain presence without oversaturation."

He was talking faster now, the words flowing easily. The Miller Brothers were asking questions and he was answering them instantly, pulling data from memory, making connections between seemingly unrelated patterns.

At one point, the older brother let out a low whistle.

“Son,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’d been doing this your whole life. For someone this young, you’re exceptionally talented at this.”

Vox smiled, polite and measured, inclining his head.

The man was more correct than he would ever know.

Twenty minutes passed. Thirty. The conference room door stayed closed.

Vox felt like himself again. Not Vincent Whittman, junior meteorologist, coffee fetcher, invisible background functionary. But himself. The person who'd built media empires through sheer force of intelligence and will.

The mask had slipped, and he didn't even care.

"Alright then," the older Miller Brother said finally, stubbing out his second cigar, "you've sold me. We're buying the afternoon slots. Full package, September through January."

"With," his brother added, "one condition."

Sterling perked up slightly, hope flickering across his face.

"All communications about this campaign go through Mr. Whittman here." The younger brother tapped the report. "He clearly understands our product and our market. We want continuity."

"Of course," Sterling said quickly. Too quickly. "Mr. Whittman will be the primary liaison. Absolutely."

Vox kept his expression carefully neutral, though a quiet surge of triumph ran through him. Then movement flickered at the edge of his vision.

The third man at the table seemed fidgety.

Vox's brain stuttered. He hadn't even noticed him. The man was older, distinguished, wearing a suit that cost more than Vox's entire wardrobe.

The man checked his watch. The gesture was subtle but pointed.

Sterling noticed. His face went through another color change, this time landing somewhere between anxious and nauseous.

"I'm sure he'll be here any second, Jonathan," Sterling said, his voice tight. "You know how artists are."

Jonathan.

Vox's mind clicked through his mental files. Jonathan Boucher. The radio station owner. The man from all those society page photographs, always pictured next to...

"Punctuality is the politeness of kings, they say."

The voice came from the doorway.

Vox's entire body went rigid.

"My apologies for keeping royalty waiting."

Chapter 10

The voice was different from the radio. Clearer. More present. It had texture and weight and it filled the room like smoke.

The door swung open, and the air seemed to shift around him.

Alastor stepped in, smiling - sharp, bright, impossibly confident.

Vox forgot how to breathe.

The man was human in a way that Vox's memories of the Radio Demon hadn't prepared him for. But the smile was exactly the same. The way he held himself, the casual ownership of the space, the absolute certainty that he was the most interesting person in any room he entered.

It was him. It was actually him.

Vox's stomach lurched, adrenaline flooding his system so fast his hands started to shake. He forced his fists into his lap, clenching them tightly, and willed his expression to remain neutral.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Not now. Not like this. He wasn't ready.

The Miller Brothers straightened in their chairs. Sterling stood, gesturing to an empty seat. "Alastor, wonderful timing. We were just discussing-"

"The magnificent work Mr. Whittman has been presenting," Alastor said smoothly, walking to the table. He sat next to Boucher, the two of them exchanging a look that spoke volumes

about their actual relationship. "I could hear bits of it from the hall. Quite fascinating analysis."

He hadn't looked at Vox yet. Was speaking about him like he was a piece of furniture that had done something unexpectedly useful.

Vox wanted to disappear. Wanted to be anywhere else. His ego was still riding high from the presentation, from finally being recognized, from feeling like himself for the first time in days.

And now this.

"Whittman," Sterling's voice cut through the fog in Vox's head. "Don't run off. Pour one for Mr. Alastor."

The room tilted slightly.

Every eye in the room was on him. The Miller Brothers, curious. Sterling, expectant. Boucher, mildly interested.

Alastor, still not looking at him.

Vox stood. His legs felt disconnected from his body. The coffee pot was suddenly very heavy in his hand.

This was worse than Margaret's dismissal. Worse than Dorothy's condescension. Worse than every small humiliation he'd endured since waking up in this timeline.

Because they were nothing. Background characters. They weren't real to him, not in any way that mattered.

But this was Alastor.

Alastor was real.

And Vox was pouring his fucking coffee.

He forced the rage down. Compartmentalized it. Shoved it into a box in the back of his mind and slammed the lid shut. Then he reached for the Vincent mask, the helpful eager employee persona, and pulled it over his face like armor.

Wide eyes. Slightly nervous. Eager to please.

He picked up the coffee pot and walked around the table.

Alastor was talking to Boucher about something, his hands moving in expressive gestures. The smile never faltered.

Vox approached. Set a clean cup in front of Alastor. Started to pour.

His hands weren't shaking anymore. He'd locked down every muscle, every nerve. This had to be perfect. First impressions were everything. He wasn't ready but he would make it work.

Improvisation. He was good at it. The ability to think on your feet, to react without a script, was the single most important skill a television personality could have.

The coffee poured in a steady stream, the sound loud in the sudden quiet. Vox kept his breathing even, his movements precise.

Then he spoke.

"Black, I assume?" His tone was more measured than he expected. "I read somewhere that you find sugar distracts from the roast."

Something shifted in the air.

The room didn't notice. The Miller Brothers were looking at their notes. Sterling was checking something in his calendar. Boucher was lighting a cigarette.

But Vox noticed.

Alastor turned his head slowly. He looked at the coffee cup first. Then up.

His eyes were dark brown, rich and steady under the fluorescent light. They locked onto Vox with an intensity that made his spine lock up.

The smile stayed fixed. But the warmth behind it vanished like someone had flipped a switch.

Alastor's eyes narrowed. Just slightly. Imperceptibly to anyone who wasn't watching closely.

But Vox was watching very closely.

The expression lasted maybe half a second. A predator assessing something in its territory. Something that didn't belong.

Then Alastor blinked, and the warmth returned like it had never left.

“I don’t recall discussing my coffee habits on the radio,” he said, voice pleasant but edged with something sharper beneath. “You’re remarkably well informed for… staff.”

The word "staff" landed like a slap.

Vox felt a flicker of panic under his calm exterior. *Fuck. What the hell did he mean by “read it somewhere”?*

He forced his expression into neutrality, letting a wry, almost private laugh escape. “Well, I suppose it’s not surprising you can’t remember everything you say on the radio, hosting every single day.” He tilted his head, amusement glinting in his eyes. “I’m a dedicated listener.”

He set down the coffee pot. “Vincent. Vincent Whittman.”

He extended his hand, offering it with the polite formality of someone presenting something valuable.

Alastor didn’t move to take it. A brief flicker of annoyance, or perhaps amusement, crossed his features.

“Vincent,” Alastor said instead, his voice smooth and measured, carefully neutral. “Your attention to detail is noted.”

Then he turned his back, leaving the handshake hanging in the air.

Dismissed.

Just like that, Alastor returned his attention to Boucher, picking up their conversation exactly where he'd left it. He lifted the coffee cup and took a sip without looking at it.

Vox lingered for a single second, then lifted the tray and stepped out of the conference room.

He kept his posture perfect. Shoulders back, spine straight, movements controlled and professional.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Vox walked down the hallway. Past the water cooler. Past the breakroom. Around the corner.

Into the bathroom.

He set the tray down on the counter and gripped the edge of the sink.

His reflection stared back at him, pale and wide eyed. His tie was crooked. When had that happened?

He'd just made contact with Alastor. Had spoken to him, served him coffee, been in the same room breathing the same air.

And Alastor had looked at him. Not through him, the way everyone else in this building did. Actually at him.

For that half second, Alastor had recognized him as a potential threat.

Then he'd dismissed him as boring.

Vox's hands were shaking again. He gripped the sink harder, his knuckles going white.

He should be furious. Should be humiliated. Should be planning elaborate revenge for being treated like this by Alastor of all people.

But underneath the rage and embarrassment was something else.

Excitement.

Alastor had noticed him. Had actually seen him, even if only for a moment. That was something. That was a foundation.

Vox stared at the man in the mirror. The man who had just bowed and scraped like a common servant.

"You dumbass," he hissed at his reflection.

He poked the glass, stabbing his finger right into his own chest.

"Dedicated listener? Really? That's the best you could come up with? 'Oh, Mr. Alastor, I just love your show, please let me shine your shoes with my tongue.'"

He laughed, a sharp, jagged sound that echoed off the tile.

"Pathetic. Absolutely revolting. You sounded like a desperate housewife calling in to request a love song. 'I read somewhere you prefer it black.' Listen to yourself. You're an Overlord. You're a god of media. And you're in here acting like a..."

He started pacing, each step sharp, measured.

He mimicked his own earlier voice, high-pitched and ridiculous. “Vincent. Vincent Whittman. Please notice me, radio man.”

With a frustrated exhale, he slammed his hand down on the counter, leaning into it, hanging his head. The sting grounded him.

After a moment, he looked up at his reflection again. Pale, wide-eyed, every inch of him bristling with fatigue and barely contained frenzy. He forced a smile, and it came out wrong at first - too wide, teeth bared, manic, almost feral.

He adjusted it. Made it smaller. Softer. More genuine.

"Step one," he said quietly to the reflection in the mirror.

Vox straightened his tie, smoothed down his hair, took a deep breath and headed back to his desk.

The game had officially begun.

Chapter 11

Vox stood beside Margaret in front of Sterling's desk, his hands clasped loosely behind his back, his expression carefully neutral. The morning sun slanted through the blinds, casting bars of light across Sterling's face as he leaned back in his chair with the satisfied air of a man who'd just won something.

"You two," Sterling said, gesturing between them with a half-smoked cigar, "are a dynamo. An absolute dynamo."

Margaret's posture shifted. Relief, mixed with the faint tension of someone waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Vox said nothing. Just waited.

"The Miller Brothers were impressed." Sterling tapped ash into the tray on his desk. "Very impressed. They've committed to a full seasonal package, and they specifically requested that you two handle all future communications."

He gave Margaret a slow once-over, cigar in hand. "You're the looker. Clients love a pretty face. Keep smiling, keep nodding, do your thing. You're the sugar that sells the coffee."

Then at Vox. "And you're the numbers man. Between the two of you, we've got a winning formula."

Margaret's shoulders dropped slightly. The tension evaporated.

Vox felt his own jaw unclench. He hadn't realized how tightly he'd been holding it.

"Thank you, sir," Margaret said, her voice warm with genuine gratitude. "We make a great team."

Sterling nodded, already turning his attention to the stack of papers on his desk. "Keep it up. I want weekly progress reports. And for God's sake, don't let the Miller Brothers change their minds."

"We won't," Margaret said.

They were dismissed.

The hallway outside Sterling's office was quieter. The morning rush had settled into the steady hum of typewriters and telephone conversations. Margaret walked ahead of Vox, her heels clicking against the linoleum with sharp, staccato precision.

Vox followed, his mind racing.

This was it. The moment where the dynamic would be set. Where he'd either cement himself as her rival or reposition himself as something else entirely.

He caught up to her as they reached the stairwell.

"Margaret," he said, his voice pitched just loud enough to be heard over the ambient noise of the building.

She stopped, turning to look at him. Her expression was guarded. Waiting.

Vox smiled. Wide, genuine, the kind of smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. The smile of someone who was happy about something.

"Thank you," he said simply.

Margaret blinked. "For what?"

"For letting me be part of this." He gestured vaguely back toward Sterling's office. "I know the research was my work, but you're the one who sold it."

He said it without bitterness. Without resentment. Just matter of fact acknowledgment of the hierarchy.

Margaret's guard dropped another inch. "Well. You *did* do excellent work on the data."

"I liked working on the project," Vox said, his tone light, almost self-deprecating. "Presenting it? Not so much. These investors… they're impossibly picky, aren't they?"

A small laugh escaped her. "That's the truth."

They started walking again, side by side now instead of Margaret leading. The rhythm felt more equal. Less like superior and subordinate.

"I really do appreciate it," Vox continued as they descended the stairs. "Honestly, it's a lot better having someone like you on the team."

"You seemed fine in that meeting," Margaret said, a hint of suspicion creeping back into her voice.

Vox shook his head, smiling faintly. "I work in broadcasting. Put me in front of a camera? No problem. Selling face-to-face? Not my thing."

He glanced at her, letting a touch of vulnerability slip into his voice. Just enough to seem sincere. "You've got the charm, the confidence…" He paused, letting his gaze linger a fraction longer than necessary. "…and the looks." He let out a casual laugh. "Isn't that what Sterling said? That's why they want you as the face."

Margaret's expression softened completely. The last traces of suspicion melted away, replaced by something that looked almost like sympathy.

"Well," she said, her tone warming, "I guess everyone has their strengths. That report was genuinely impressive."

"Thank you," Vox said again. "That means a lot."

They reached the bottom of the stairs. The lobby stretched out ahead of them, all hardwood and brass and the echo of footsteps. Through the glass doors, Vox could see rain beginning to fall, fat droplets hitting the pavement in irregular patterns.

Margaret sighed. "Of course it's raining. I don't have an umbrella."

Vox pulled his own from under his arm. The cheap black umbrella Vincent had owned for years, the handle wrapped in electrical tape where it had cracked.

"I do," he said. "Let me walk you to the cab stand."

Margaret hesitated, looking between him and the rain. "You don't have to do that."

"I insist." Vox was already opening the umbrella, testing the mechanism. It opened with a soft whoosh, the fabric spreading wide. "It's pouring. You'll get soaked."

Something in her expression shifted. Gratitude, maybe. Or just the relief of not having to run through the rain in heels and a skirt.

"Alright," she said. "Thank you, Vincent."

They stepped out into the weather.

The rain was heavier than it had looked from inside, coming down in sheets that turned the street into a blur of gray and black. Vox held the umbrella carefully, angling it so most of the coverage went to Margaret. His left shoulder got wet immediately, rain soaking through his jacket.

He didn't adjust the umbrella. Didn't shift it to cover himself better.

Gentlemen sacrificed comfort for ladies. That was the rule. The social script everyone understood.

They walked in silence for half a block, their footsteps splashing through puddles. The cab stand was visible ahead, a small covered area where two yellow cabs idled with their engines running.

Margaret cleared her throat. "Look, Vincent. About earlier this week..."

Vox glanced at her. "What about it?"

"The dinner." Her voice was tight. "Friday night. I... I should have shown up. Or at least warned you. That was very unprofessional of me."

"Oh." Vox let surprise color his voice. "I'd forgotten about that, honestly."

It was a complete lie. He had not forgotten. Would never forget. The humiliation of standing outside The Starlight Room, waiting like an idiot while she used his work and left him

stranded.

But Vincent would let it go. Vincent would be understanding.

"Really?" Margaret sounded skeptical.

"Really." Vox smiled again. "I figured something came up. These things happen. It's not like we're friends or anything. Just colleagues."

The words were carefully chosen. Just colleagues. Not rivals. Not enemies. Colleagues who occasionally helped each other out.

Margaret's shoulders relaxed further. "Well. Still. It was rude of me. And then you went ahead and did all that work anyway..."

"The work needed to be done," Vox said simply. "Sterling would have been furious if it wasn't ready Monday morning. I wasn't going to let the station down… and I didn't want to put *you* in an awkward spot by not having it ready. Even if… well, I was disappointed about missing dinner."

He let that last part sound a little wistful. A little sad. But not accusatory.

Margaret looked at him for a long moment. They'd reached the cab stand now, standing under the small awning that provided minimal shelter. Rain drummed on the metal roof overhead.

"You're very thoughtful," she said finally.

"I try to be."

"And you really don't mind? Doing the research while I get the credit?"

This was it. The moment where he could either push back or cement the dynamic.

Vox chose cement.

"Margaret." He turned to face her fully, his expression earnest. "Why do you think we're rivals?"

She blinked. "I... I don't..."

"You do," Vox said gently. "I can tell. The way you tensed up in Sterling's office when he praised us both. The way you've been watching me all week like I'm going to steal your job."

Margaret's jaw tightened. She started to protest.

Vox held up a hand. "I don't want your job."

"You don't?"

"God, no." He laughed, and it came out warm and genuine sounding. "Account management? Dealing with clients day in and day out, managing their expectations, schmoozing at dinners and events? That sounds like my personal nightmare."

He took a step closer, lowering his voice just slightly. "Honestly… we'd be stronger if we worked together. With our combined strengths no one could touch us."

Margaret's expression shifted again, surprise giving way to cautious interest.

"I like being on air," Vox said, voice dropping conspiratorial as they walked. "I like research. I like making the maps, charts, projections. That's where I'm comfortable. That's where I shine. And with you handling the front, we could really be unstoppable."

"Well," Margaret said, a small smile playing at her lips. "I do have a talent for people."

Vox's smile widened, eyes glinting just enough to feel deliberate. "Exactly. That's why you're perfect where you are. And me doing the heavy lifting behind the scenes? That keeps Sterling happy, keeps him off my back… and makes *us* look good." He tilted his head slightly, letting the words hang.

He let the logic settle for a moment. Then added, softer: "Win win. Right?"

Margaret studied him. Her eyes were sharp, assessing. Looking for the trap.

But Vox's expression stayed open. Honest. The face of someone who genuinely believed what he was saying.

Finally, Margaret's posture relaxed completely. The last wall came down.

"When you put it that way," she said, and there was something almost relieved in her laugh, "it does make sense."

"We help each other," Vox said, nodding. "That's what good colleagues do."

One of the cabs pulled forward, stopping in front of them. The driver rolled down his window. "You need a ride, miss?"

Margaret glanced at the cab, then back at Vox. "I suppose I do." She paused. "Thank you, Vincent. For the umbrella. And for... everything else."

"Of course." Vox moved forward, reaching for the cab door.

He opened it with a smooth, practiced motion. The door swung wide, and Margaret turned to step inside, her back to him.

Completely vulnerable.

The thought arrived unbidden, sharp and immediate.

The street was slick with rain. Puddles everywhere. Wet pavement that would be so easy to slip on if someone lost their balance. A simple shove, just a little push at the right angle, and she'd go down hard. Skull meeting concrete with that distinctive wet *crack.*

An accident. A tragic slip in the rain. How terrible. Poor Margaret.

His hand was already on the door handle. All he'd have to do was move. Shift his weight. Apply pressure at exactly the right moment.

She was still talking, thanking him again, completely oblivious.

The cab driver was looking at his meter, not paying attention.

No witnesses except the rain.

Vox's hand tightened on the handle.

Then his brain caught up to his impulse.

Too close. Too obvious. He was literally the last person to see her alive. He'd walked her to the cab. Had his umbrella over her. The cab driver would remember him. Would describe him to the police when they inevitably asked questions.

And there would be questions. A young woman, successful, well liked, suddenly dead from a suspicious fall? They'd investigate. They'd talk to everyone at the station. They'd ask about enemies, about rivals, about anyone who might have benefited from her death.

And who had just been praised alongside her in Sterling's office? Who had access to all her work? Who stood to gain the most from her absence?

Vincent fucking Whittman.

The logic cascaded through his mind in the space between heartbeats.

Vox's hand relaxed on the door. He smiled, warm and genuine, as Margaret settled into the back seat.

"Get home safe, Margaret," he said, his voice carrying just the right note of friendly concern.

"I will." She smiled back at him through the rain streaked window. "See you tomorrow."

Vox closed the door gently. Stepped back. Raised his hand in a small wave as the cab pulled away from the curb.

He stood there for a moment, watching the taillights disappear into the gray curtain of rain. His smile stayed fixed on his face until the cab turned the corner and vanished completely.

Then it dropped.

The expression that replaced it was flat. Dead. The look of someone staring at a problem that needed solving.

Vox turned and started walking home.

The rain soaked through his suit jacket immediately without the umbrella's protection. Water ran down his neck, cold and unpleasant, but he barely noticed. His mind was elsewhere, spinning through scenarios and calculations.

He hated this.

Hated playing nice. Hated the helpful assistant act. Hated pretending to be grateful for scraps of recognition while others took credit for his work.

The unfairness of it burned.

By the time Vox reached his apartment building, he was soaked through completely. Water squelched in his shoes with every step. His hair was plastered to his forehead. He probably looked like a drowned rat.

Mrs. Kowalski was in the hallway, carrying a bag of groceries. She took one look at him and laughed.

"Forgot your umbrella, dear?"

"Left it with a colleague," Vox said, his smile automatic. "She needed it more than I did."

"Well, aren't you a gentleman." Mrs. Kowalski shook her head, amused. "Get inside and dry off before you catch pneumonia."

"Yes, ma'am."

Inside his apartment, Vox peeled off his wet clothes and draped them over the radiator. The ancient heating system clanked and hissed.

He stood in front of the bathroom mirror in his undershirt and slacks, water still dripping from his hair onto his shoulders.

The Perfect Gentleman act had been flawless.

Margaret trusted him now. Or at least, she thought he was useful and non threatening. A helpful little assistant who knew his place and didn't aspire to anything more.

Good. Let her get comfortable. Let her rely on him.

Let the whole office see how helpful and loyal Vincent Whittman was.

Because when she eventually had her tragic accident, and she would, he'd already decided that much, he would be the grieving protégé. The shocked colleague who couldn't believe such a terrible thing had happened to such a wonderful person.

The police would look for enemies. Rivals. Jealous lovers. People with obvious motives and clear opportunities.

They wouldn't look at the helpful assistant who'd just walked her to a cab in the rain.

Vox dried his hair with a threadbare towel, his movements mechanical.

The problem was timing. And method. And a dozen other variables that needed to align perfectly.

He walked to the kitchen table and sat down, pulling out the calendar Vincent kept tacked to the wall. It was mostly empty. Weather report schedules. Rent due dates. Nothing interesting.

Vox started filling it in.

Margaret's late nights. He'd been paying attention all week. Tuesday and Thursday, she stayed past seven working on client presentations. Friday, she usually left early for social engagements. Monday and Wednesday were variable.

He marked the patterns in pencil, light enough that they could be erased if anyone ever saw the calendar.

Then he started thinking about locations.

The cab stand was too public. Too many witnesses. But what about the walk from the building to the cab stand? That three block stretch was darker, less trafficked after hours. If someone were to encounter trouble there...

No. Still too close to the office. Still too direct a connection.

He needed separation. Distance. Both physical and temporal.

What about her route home? He didn't know where she lived, but that was information he could acquire. A casual question here, a bit of eavesdropping there. People were remarkably

careless about personal details.

Or what about her social calendar? She went to dinners, events, parties. Places where she'd be alone afterward, walking to her car or waiting for a cab in isolated areas.

The possibilities began to branch and multiply.

Vox pulled out a piece of paper and started writing.

If Margaret works late on Thursday, then the walk to the cab stand becomes viable.

If Margaret attends a social event alone, then the parking garage or street afterward becomes viable.

If Margaret trusts him enough to accept a ride home, then options multiply significantly.

He wrote for twenty minutes, his handwriting small and precise. When he finished, he had three pages of scenarios, each one carefully thought through, each one with contingencies and alternatives.

Then he folded the papers and walked to the sink.

Struck a match.

Watched them burn.

The ash swirled down the drain with the running water, dissolving into nothing.

He didn't need the notes. They were in his head now, organized and ready to be deployed when the moment was right.

Two weeks, he decided. Maybe three.

Long enough to build the rapport. To establish himself as Margaret's loyal assistant. To make sure everyone at the station saw them as a team.

Then something would happen. A mugging gone wrong. A slip on wet stairs. A random act of violence in a city that was seeing more and more of those lately. Tragi, senseless and completely unpreventable.

And Vincent Whittman would be devastated. Would step up to fill the gap Margaret left behind. Would prove himself capable of handling her responsibilities.

Sterling would promote him. The clients would accept the transition. Life would go on.

Vox dried his hands and looked at himself in the bathroom mirror.

He felt in control for the first time since waking up in this timeline. He was playing the long game. Building toward something. Using the tools available to him instead of raging against the ones he'd lost.

This was how you won. Not with brute force. With patience. The willingness to smile and play your role while you set up the pieces exactly where they needed to be.

He smiled at his reflection. The expression was calm. Satisfied.

Margaret was safe with him. For now.

Vox turned off the light and walked to the Murphy bed. His wet clothes were still dripping on the radiator. The guppy was still swimming in its tank. The rain was still falling outside, steady and rhythmic against the window.

He lay down in the darkness, his hands folded on his chest, staring at the ceiling. In two weeks, maybe three, Margaret Holloway would have an accident.

And no one would ever suspect helpful, loyal, harmless Vincent Whittman.

The smile stayed on his face until sleep finally came.

Chapter 12

The office felt different on Tuesday morning.

Vox noticed it the moment he stepped through the doors. The energy had shifted, crackling with a buzz that hadn't been there yesterday. People were talking in clusters near the water cooler, voices animated, gestures expansive. The Miller Brothers deal had officially made waves.

He walked to his desk, set down his briefcase, and started organizing the weather maps for the afternoon broadcast. The routine was soothing. Predictable. A small island of control in the chaos of the station.

Footsteps approached. Vox didn't look up.

"Vincent?"

He turned. Margaret stood beside his desk, holding two cups of coffee. Her expression was uncertain, almost awkward, which was a dramatic departure from her usual sharp confidence.

"I thought..." She held out one of the cups. "Since we're a team now. Partners. I should probably start acting like it."

Vox blinked. Looked at the coffee. Back at her face.

She was nervous. Actually nervous. Her fingers fidgeted with the handle of her own cup, and there was a faint flush creeping up her neck.

He took the coffee with both hands, his smile warm and genuine looking. "That's very thoughtful, Margaret. Thank you."

He lifted the cup to his lips and took a sip.

It was terrible.

Not just bad coffee, which he'd grown accustomed to. This was aggressively wrong. Too much sugar. The wrong ratio of everything. It tasted like someone had dissolved candy in motor oil.

Vox's face didn't change. He swallowed, then took another sip for good measure.

"Perfect," he said, his voice carrying just the right note of appreciation. "Just how I like it."

Margaret's entire posture relaxed. Her smile widened, relief flooding her features. "I'm glad. I wasn't sure if you took sugar."

"I do." Another sip of the vile liquid. "This is perfect. Really."

She lingered. Not hovering exactly, but not leaving either. Her hand came up to fiddle with her hair, tucking a strand behind her ear in a gesture that was definitely deliberate.

"So," she said, her voice taking on a slightly different quality. Softer. "I was thinking. About what you said yesterday. About us being a team."

"Yes?"

"I think you're right." She shifted her weight, leaning slightly against the edge of his desk. "We do work well together. And I... I appreciate how supportive you've been. It's refreshing, honestly. Most of the men here are so competitive."

Vox set down the coffee cup carefully. "Competition has its place. But I think cooperation gets better results."

"That's exactly what I mean." Margaret's smile turned warmer. "You get it. You understand that success doesn't have to be a zero sum game."

Vox smiled. It felt like he was in on a joke she didn't know existed.

Margaret was still playing with her hair. Still leaning against his desk. The body language was unmistakable.

Vox's internal monologue screeched to a halt.

She wasn't just grateful. She was *interested*. This was a complication he hadn't anticipated.

"Well," he said carefully, his smile never wavering, "I'm just happy to help. Your success is the team's success."

"Our success," Margaret corrected, and there was something almost flirtatious in the way she said it.

Vox picked up his pencil, tapping it lightly against the desk. A nervous gesture, one he wasn't entirely sure he was performing, or actually feeling.

"Right. Our success."

Margaret checked her watch, seeming to remember she had actual work to do. "I should let you get back to your maps. But Vincent?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For the coffee walk yesterday. And for... everything else." She touched his shoulder briefly, her fingers light and fleeting. "It means a lot."

Then she walked away, her heels clicking against the linoleum.

Vox sat very still for a moment, staring at the space where she'd been.

Then he picked up the coffee cup and walked to the breakroom. Poured the entire thing down the sink when no one was looking.

This was going to be more complicated than he'd thought.

But complicated could be useful. Complicated meant emotional investment. Meant she'd trust him even more. Meant when the tragic accident eventually happened, her death would hit the office even harder because everyone would know they'd been close.

Vox walked back to his desk, his expression thoughtful.

He could work with this.

- - -

Wednesday afternoon found Margaret at her desk, surrounded by papers and looking progressively more frustrated.

Vox had been watching her for twenty minutes from across the newsroom. She kept picking up sheets, setting them down, rearranging them in different orders like physical reorganization would somehow make the data make sense.

A new client brief. Smaller account than Miller Brothers, but still significant. And Margaret was trying to handle it herself, probably to prove she could replicate their previous success without relying entirely on Vox.

Noble. Doomed. But noble.

He gave her another five minutes. Watched her chew her bottom lip, a stress tell she probably didn't know she had. Watched her cross something out, then write it again in the margin.

Then he stood, picked up his chair, and carried it over to her desk.

Margaret looked up, startled, as he set the chair down next to hers and sat.

"The demographic data on these regional accounts is tricky," Vox said without preamble, leaning forward to look at her papers. "Let me show you a shortcut."

"Vincent, I don't need-"

"I know you don't need help." He interrupted with a small smile. "But this section here." He tapped the page. "The way they've formatted it is deliberately confusing. It took me hours to figure out the first time I saw it."

Margaret's protest died. She looked at the papers, then at him. "Hours?"

"Hours." The lie came easily. There was nothing complicated about it, nothing that had taken more than a glance, but he knew how reassurance worked. Vox pulled her notepad closer, his shoulder brushing against hers. "Here. See this column? It looks like it's showing total households, but it's actually showing percentage distribution. And this one is raw numbers, but they've mixed the age brackets."

He could smell her perfume. Something floral and expensive that made his sinuses burn. They were sitting close enough that he could feel the warmth radiating from her arm.

Margaret leaned in, studying where he was pointing. "Oh. Oh, I see what you mean. That *is* confusing."

"Deliberately so." Vox's voice dropped slightly, taking on a more intimate quality, like he was sharing a secret. "The data companies do this to justify their consulting fees. Make it look more complicated than it is so clients think they're getting specialized expertise."

His hand moved across the page, pointing out patterns. Margaret's eyes followed, but Vox could feel her attention shifting. She wasn't just looking at the numbers anymore.

"You make this look so easy," she said softly.

Vox turned his head slightly. They were very close now. Close enough that he could see the faint dusting of powder on her cheeks, the careful application of her lipstick.

"It's not easy," he said, holding her gaze. "It's just practice. And honestly," He smiled, warm and sincere. "I just want you to shine, Margaret. Not that you need my help for that."

Her cheeks flushed. The color spread down her neck, visible above her collar.

Vox's internal reaction was immediate and visceral. He wanted to recoil, to put distance between them. Instead, he held perfectly still. Let the moment stretch just long enough to register. Then he pulled back, returning his attention to the data like nothing had happened.

"So if we reorganize the columns this way," he continued, his voice back to its normal professional tone, "the patterns become much clearer. See?"

Margaret blinked. The spell broke. She cleared her throat, looking back at the papers. "Yes. Yes, I see."

They worked together for another fifteen minutes. Vox explaining, Margaret taking notes. His hand occasionally brushed against hers when they both reached for the same paper. Each time, she startled slightly. Each time, she didn't pull away.

When they finished, Margaret sat back in her chair, looking at the now organized brief with something like wonder.

"I would have been stuck on this for days," she admitted.

"No, you wouldn't have." Vox stood, picking up his chair. "You would have figured it out eventually. I just saved you some time."

"Still." She looked up at him. "Thank you."

He smiled. Nodded. Carried his chair back to his desk.

Behind him, he could feel her watching.

He sat down and picked up his pencil, returning to his weather maps like nothing significant had just happened.

Because nothing significant *had* happened.

- - -

Thursday at lunch, Margaret invited him to the diner down the street.

"My treat," she said, and there was a brightness in her voice that suggested this was a bigger gesture than it seemed.

The diner was one of those all chrome and red vinyl affairs that tried very hard to look modern and mostly just looked cheap. They sat in a booth near the window, the afternoon sun streaming through the glass and making everything look slightly overexposed.

Margaret ordered a salad. Vox ordered coffee and a sandwich he probably wouldn't finish.

"You never talk about yourself," Margaret said once the waitress left.

Vox looked up from the menu he'd been pretending to study. "Don't I?"

"No." She folded her hands on the table, leaning forward slightly. "I realized I know almost nothing about you. Where you're from, what you did before the station, your family. Nothing."

"There's not much to tell."

"I doubt that." Her smile was warm, encouraging. "Come on, Vincent. We're partners now. I should at least know the basics."

Vox set down the menu. This was a test. Not a deliberate one, but a test nonetheless. She was looking for connection, for intimacy, for the kind of personal details that would make him feel real to her.

Fine. He could give her that.

"I grew up around here," he said, the lie forming smoothly. "Small town. My father died when I was young. Heart attack. My mother raised me and my sisters alone."

Margaret's expression softened immediately. "Oh, Vincent. I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago." He looked down at his hands, letting a touch of sadness creep into his voice. "But it was hard. Money was tight. My mother worked two jobs just to keep us fed. I started working at fourteen. Grocery store, then the feed lot, then wherever would hire me."

None of this was true. Vincent's actual childhood had been thoroughly middle class and unremarkable. But Vox had learned decades ago that people loved a good struggle narrative. Made you seem more worthy of your success.

"That must have been difficult," Margaret said softly.

"It taught me the value of hard work." Vox looked up, meeting her eyes. "And loyalty. My mother always said that the people who stick with you through the hard times are the ones worth keeping. Everyone else is just…" He gestured vaguely. "Noise."

Margaret reached across the table. Her hand covered his, warm and soft.

"That's beautiful," she said. "And it explains a lot about you. Why you're so dedicated. Why you're willing to work so hard without needing recognition."

Vox’s lips curved into a faint, almost imperceptible smirk. "Yes, I do try to stay modest. Humility is a virtue after all."

Vox looked down at their joined hands. Her thumb was rubbing small circles against his knuckles, a gesture that was definitely intentional.

"I just want to build something real," he added. "Stability. A career I can be proud of. Maybe eventually..." He trailed off, letting the implication hang.

"Eventually what?"

He smiled, self deprecating. "This is going to sound silly."

"Tell me."

"A family. Eventually. When I'm established enough to support one properly." He squeezed her hand gently. "I don't want my kids to grow up the way I did. I want them to have security. Opportunity. A father who's present."

Margaret's eyes were practically shining. "Vincent, that's not silly at all. That's wonderful."

The waitress arrived with their food. Margaret quickly pulled her hand back.

They ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Then Margaret spoke again.

"You know what strikes me about you?"

Vox looked up, chewing his sandwich.

"You actually listen," she said. "Most men, they just wait for their turn to talk. But you really listen. You pay attention to what people say."

I listen because I am memorizing your schedule so I can kill you more efficiently, Vox thought.

"It's important," he said instead. "People tell you everything if you just pay attention. Their fears, their hopes, what matters to them. You can't help someone if you don't understand them."

Margaret set down her fork. "You're different from the other men here, Vincent. You're actually..." She searched for the word. "Kind. Thoughtful. You care about people."

"I care about my team," Vox said, his tone warm and genuine sounding. "And you're my team now, Margaret."

Her smile could have powered the entire city grid.

They finished lunch. Margaret paid, as promised. They walked back to the office together.

By the time they got back to the station, Vox had learned her favorite color, her sister's name, and exactly where she lived.

All useful information. More or less.

- - -

Friday evening, six PM.

The newsroom had mostly emptied out. The weekend skeleton crew was settling in for the evening broadcast, but the administrative staff, the researchers, the mid level functionaries had all fled for their weekend plans.

Vox sat at his desk, working on projection models for Monday's meeting. The numbers were behaving, falling into neat patterns that would make Margaret look brilliant when she presented them.

Footsteps approached. He didn't look up.

"Vincent?"

He turned. Margaret stood beside his desk, her coat already on, her purse over her shoulder. She looked hesitant, like she was working up the courage to say something.

"I'm heading out," she said.

"Have a good weekend."

She didn't leave. Just stood there, fidgeting with her purse strap.

"I was thinking," she said finally. "I'm going to get a drink at The Blue Note. It's a jazz place, nice atmosphere. If you... wanted to come?"

The invitation hung in the air between them.

Vox's mind raced through the implications. Going with her would cement the relationship. Would push them from colleagues to something more personal. But it would also complicate things. Make her death messier. Make him more visible as someone close to her.

And more importantly, Alastor's broadcast started at ten. He had four hours, but he'd need time to get home, to settle in, to prepare...

"I wish I could," he said, and he let genuine regret color his voice. "I really do. But I want to finish this projection for Monday. I want you to walk into that meeting and blow them away again."

Margaret's face fell slightly. "Vincent, it's Friday night. You work too hard."

"I work hard for you," Vox corrected gently. He reached out, his hand finding hers almost automatically. The gesture was unconscious, the kind of casual touch that had become natural over the week. "For us. This account is important. I want to make sure we get it right."

Margaret looked at their joined hands, then back at his face. "You're too good to me."

"You're worth it."

She hesitated, then reached out with her other hand. Set it on his shoulder, the touch lingering.

"You should take breaks though," she said softly. "All work and no play, you know."

"I'll take a break once we've secured this account." Vox smiled up at her. "Promise."

Margaret's hand slid from his shoulder down to his upper arm, squeezing gently before letting go. "Alright. But next week, we're celebrating properly. Dinner, drinks, the whole thing."

"It's a date." The words came out automatically, and Vox realized his mistake a second too late.

He reached for his coffee cup and brought it to his lips, taking a sip, just as Margaret's smile turned absolutely radiant.

"A date. I like the sound of that, Vinny."

The coughing fit was immediate and violent. His hand flew to his mouth, his eyes watering as he tried to clear his throat. Margaret's expression shifted from pleased to concerned in an instant.

"Oh my God, are you okay?"

Vox held up one hand, still coughing. Managed to gasp out: "Fine. Sorry. Just... wrong pipe."

"Let me get you water-"

"No, no." He cleared his throat, eyes still watering. "I'm fine. Really. Just… please, don't call me that."

Margaret looked a little embarrassed, her smile faltering. Vox forced a smile of his own, tight and unnatural. He had to cover it, had to keep the easy rapport intact.

"My grandmother… used to call me Vinny," he said smoothly, the lie forming instantly. Desperate, convenient, and just plausible enough.

Margaret’s concern softened, her expression gentler. "She did?"

Vox nodded once, keeping his jaw rigid. She didn't need to know how much that nickname made his skin crawl. It was better to lie than ruin this.

"Yeah." Vox wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "She passed a few years ago. Cancer. Hearing that name again just... caught me off guard. Brought back memories."

Margaret's hand went to her mouth. "Oh, Vincent, I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I won't-"

"It's fine." Vox cleared his throat again. "You didn't know. How could you? It's just a sensitive subject. But please, don't feel bad. You didn't mean anything by it."

"I still feel terrible." Margaret looked genuinely distressed. "Your grandmother must have been very special to you."

"She was." Another lie, smooth and easy. "She basically raised me after my father died. Taught me how to cook, how to dress properly, how to treat people with respect. Everything good about me came from her."

This was completely fabricated. His grandmother had been alive and well two states over, sending occasional letters that Vincent never responded to. But the story was working. Margaret's expression had shifted from romantic interest to maternal sympathy.

"That's beautiful," she said softly. "I'm sure she'd be proud of the man you've become."

Vox looked down, letting emotion play across his face. Grief, nostalgia, the kind of vulnerable sadness that made people want to comfort you. "I hope so."

Margaret squeezed his shoulder again. "I know so."

She stepped back, adjusting her coat. "I'll let you work. But Vincent?"

"Yes?"

"Take care of yourself, okay? Even if it's just... taking breaks. Eating proper meals. You matter too."

"I will. Thank you, Margaret."

She lingered for one more moment, looking at him with an expression that was equal parts affection and concern. Then she turned and walked toward the exit.

Vox watched her go. Watched her look back over her shoulder once before pushing through the doors.

The moment she was gone, his expression dropped.

He wiped his hand on his pants. Hard. Scrubbing away the sensation of her touch like he was wiping off grease.

He hated this. Hated how easy it was. Hated that she bought every single lie without question. Hated the casual touching, the lingering looks, the way she said his name like it meant something. And thought they were close enough for nicknames.

But it was working.

She trusted him implicitly. Would defend him if anyone questioned his character. Would never, not in a million years, suspect him of anything worse than being too dedicated to his work.

Vox stood, gathering his things. The projection models could wait until Monday morning. He had more important things to do tonight.

Like listening to a radio broadcast. Like continuing his surveillance of the one person in this city who was actually worth paying attention to.

As he walked out of the building, his shoulder still felt warm where Margaret had touched it. He rolled it, trying to shake off the sensation.

One more week. Maybe less if the opportunity presented itself.

The rain had stopped, but the streets were still wet, reflecting the streetlights in rippling patterns. Vox walked home through the puddles, his mind already shifting away from Margaret and toward the broadcast.

Tonight, he'd listen more carefully. Take better notes. Start building a real profile instead of just reacting with irritation.

Behind him, the station lights dimmed as the evening crew settled in.

Ahead, his apartment waited. And at ten o'clock, Alastor's voice would fill the room.

Everything was proceeding according to plan.

Chapter 13

The newspaper clipping joined the others on the wall with a soft rustle of tape.

Vox stepped back, tilting his head to examine his handiwork. The apartment wall had transformed over the past week into something between a detective's murder board and a shrine to obsession. Newspaper articles. Photocopied police reports he'd sweet-talked out of a filing clerk. A hand-drawn map of the city with red pins marking locations. And in the center, like a spider in its web, a publicity photo of Alastor torn from a magazine.

The guppy swam its endless circle, unconcerned.

"Harold Williams," Vox said aloud, looking over at the guppy as he tapped the newest clipping. "Age forty-two. Businessman. Found stabbed in an alley near the theater district."

He'd memorized the article already, but speaking it helped him think. The ritual of it, the performance, even if his only audience was a fish that would be dead in six months.

"Last seen leaving a restaurant on Seventh Street around eleven PM Friday night." Vox traced the route on his map with one finger. "Body discovered early Saturday morning. Time of death estimated between ten PM and eleven PM. Are you getting all that?"

He moved to the timeline he'd been building. A long strip of butcher paper tacked horizontally across the wall, marked with dates and times in his precise handwriting.

Friday night. Ten to eleven PM.

His hand hovered over the paper.

Then froze.

Friday night. Ten to eleven PM.

Vox turned slowly to look at the radio sitting on its crate in the corner. The radio that had been playing Alastor's broadcast Friday night. The broadcast that ran from ten PM to midnight.

The broadcast Vox had listened to. Live. In real time.

"That doesn't make much sense," he said quietly. "Does it?"

He walked to the stack of newspapers he'd been collecting. Flipped back through them until he found Friday's entertainment section. There, in the radio listings: "Alastor's Evening Program, 10:00 PM - 12:00 AM."

His brain stuttered, trying to reconcile the impossible math.

"He was on air," Vox said, turning to the fishtank once again. "We both heard him. He took a caller at ten fifteen. I remember because the woman asked about the weather and he made that joke about checking with the meteorologists."

He started pacing. Three steps to the wall. Three steps back.

"He introduced a song at ten forty-five. Duke Ellington. 'Mood Indigo.' He talked about the recording session, about the technical innovation of the arrangement. Do you remember that?"

The timeline mocked him from the wall. Two events, simultaneously occurring, physically impossible to reconcile.

Vox's pacing got faster.

"Recording. It has to be a recording. Pre-recorded segments, edited together, played back while he's out doing..." He gestured violently at the murder clipping. "This."

But that didn't track. The caller at ten fifteen had asked about current events, about something that had happened that afternoon. Alastor had responded with specific details, referencing that day's news. You couldn't pre-record that.

Unless he had an accomplice. Someone in the booth, taking calls, feeding him information. But that required trust. Required bringing someone else into the secret. And everything Vox knew about Alastor suggested he preferred working alone.

"Magic," Vox said flatly. Then laughed, the sound harsh and bitter. "Right. Magic. He's using voodoo or some bullshit to be in two places at once."

But he wasn't in hell yet. This was Earth. Physics still applied. You couldn't bend reality just because you wanted to.

Could you?

Vox stopped pacing and stared at the wall. At the timeline. At the murder clipping. At Alastor's smiling face in the publicity photo.

The man had the perfect alibi. Thousands of people listening to his voice. Witnesses who could testify he was on air during the exact time someone was being stabbed to death three miles away.

Vox's hands clenched into fists at his sides.

This wasn't just murder. This was Alastor showing off, demonstrating that he could kill someone while simultaneously being the most visible person in the city. Proving he was untouchable.

And Vox had no idea how he'd done it.

The rage built slowly, heat spreading through his chest and up his neck. His jaw clenched so tight his teeth ached. He stared at Alastor's photo, at that insufferable smile, and wanted to put his fist through it.

Instead, he kicked the pile of newspapers stacked by the armchair.

They exploded outward, pages scattering across the floor in a cascade of black and white. One sheet landed face up, showing an advertisement for washing machines. The brand was Miller Brothers.

Vox breathed hard, staring at the chaos he'd created.

Then he crouched down and started gathering the papers. Slowly. Methodically. Putting them back in order.

Control. He still had control over this much, at least.

By the time he finished, his hands had stopped shaking.

He stood, walked to the wall, and stared at the timeline again.

There had to be an explanation. A logical, rational explanation that didn't involve magic or impossibility. He just had to find it.

The guppy swam past, oblivious to existential crises.

Vox pulled out his notebook and started writing.

- - -

Friday evening arrived with the kind of gray, oppressive weather that made the whole city look washed out. Vox stood at his apartment window, watching rain streak down the glass in irregular patterns.

Five forty-five PM.

In fifteen minutes, he'd need to leave for The Blue Note if he wanted to catch Margaret. Build more rapport. Cement the relationship. Play the good colleague who sacrificed his Friday evening to celebrate their success.

The radio sat on its crate, dark and silent.

Alastor's broadcast started at ten. Four hours from now. Four hours Vox could spend gathering intelligence, observing Margaret's social circle, making himself more valuable to the team.

But what if he didn't make it back in time? He could stay here. Listen to the broadcast. Take notes. Try to find some clue, some slip, some tiny crack in Alastor's perfect facade.

Vox checked his reflection in the bathroom mirror. He'd gotten ready, just in case. Put on his better shirt. Made himself presentable for an evening out.

Margaret would be disappointed if he didn't show. Would feel stood up. Would start to question his commitment to their partnership.

The radio remained silent.

Six PM.

Vox turned away from the mirror and walked to the armchair. Sat down. Stared at the radio.

He should go. He knew he should go. This was exactly the kind of opportunity he needed to capitalize on. Time with Margaret outside the office. A chance to seem human, relatable, invested in something beyond work.

Instead, he reached over and turned on the radio.

Static crackled through the speakers, then resolved into music. Some big band number, cheerful and grating. Not Alastor's show. That wouldn't start for hours.

But Vox stayed in the chair anyway.

He couldn't explain it. Couldn't rationalize it. The smart play was The Blue Note. The strategic move was Margaret.

But the thought of missing Alastor's broadcast, of not being here when that voice came through the speakers, made him uncomfortable. What if today was the day he'd let something slip?

Six thirty came and went.

Seven.

By seven thirty, it was too late to show up at The Blue Note without looking like an afterthought. Margaret would have already had her first drink, already settled in with whoever else had joined her.

Vox stayed in the chair.

The music played on. Commercial breaks came and went. He barely heard any of it. His attention was locked on the clock, watching the minutes crawl toward ten.

At nine forty-five, he made coffee. The good stuff he'd saved up for, the tin from one of the top shelves in the grocery store that didn't taste like mud.

At nine fifty-eight, he settled back into the armchair, coffee in hand, notebook balanced on his knee.

At ten PM exactly, the music faded.

"Good evening, dear listeners."

Vox's entire body tensed up.

Alastor's voice filled the apartment, warm and familiar, and Vox closed his eyes for just a moment. *How annoying.*

"I hope this Friday evening finds you well," Alastor continued. "Perhaps you're settling in after a long week. Perhaps you're preparing for weekend adventures. Or perhaps, like me, you're simply grateful for the quieter hours of the night."

The broadcast continued. Music selections. Commentary on the week's events. A humorous anecdote about a mishap with the station's coffee machine.

Vox took notes mechanically. Time stamps. Topics discussed. Anything that might be useful later.

Twenty minutes in, Alastor's tone shifted slightly. Still warm, still friendly, but with an undercurrent of genuine enthusiasm.

"I had the distinct pleasure of stopping by The Blue Note this evening before the show," he said. "For those unfamiliar, it's a wonderful little jazz establishment downtown. Intimate atmosphere, excellent musicians. Tonight's quartet was simply transcendent."

Vox's pencil stopped moving.

"The pianist in particular," Alastor continued, his voice carrying that particular quality of someone describing something they genuinely enjoyed. "Such technical precision combined with real emotional depth. It's rare to find both in equal measure. If you have the opportunity, I highly recommend catching their Friday evening performances."

The Blue Note.

Vox set down his notebook very carefully.

The Blue Note, where Margaret had invited him. Where she'd gone for drinks. Where she was probably still sitting, probably with colleagues from the station, probably wondering why Vincent hadn't shown up.

The Blue Note, where Alastor had been tonight.

The two of them. Same location. Same time.

And Vox had been here. In his apartment. Waiting for a broadcast that hadn't even started yet.

The realization arrived slowly, each piece clicking into place.

He'd had a legitimate excuse to be there. Margaret's invitation. The perfect cover. He could have observed Alastor in his natural habitat, in a social setting, could have gathered actual intelligence instead of just listening to him talk about jazz albums.

And he'd stayed home.

To listen to Alastor talk about the place he could have been.

Vox stood abruptly. The notebook fell to the floor. He didn't pick it up.

He walked to the sink and turned on the water. Started washing the single coffee cup sitting there, his movements sharp and aggressive. The water was too hot. It burned his hands. He didn't adjust the temperature.

Margaret had been there. Alastor had been there.

"Fuck," he said quietly.

He scrubbed the cup harder. Soap suds ran down his arms to his elbows, dripping onto the floor.

The broadcast continued in the background. Alastor was introducing another song now, something by Benny Goodman, his voice smooth and untroubled.

Vox's grip on the cup tightened. The ceramic creaked under the pressure.

This was insane. This entire thing was insane. He was supposed to be using Alastor, manipulating him, positioning himself to either exploit or destroy him depending on which proved more useful.

Instead, he was organizing his entire life around a broadcast schedule. Building shrines on his wall. Taking notes like some obsessed lunatic.

The cup shattered.

Vox stared at his hand. Blood welled up from a cut on his palm, mixing with the soap suds and running pink down the drain.

The pain was sharp and immediate. Grounding.

He turned off the water. Wrapped his hand in a dish towel. The white fabric bloomed red.

Behind him, Alastor's voice continued, oblivious and infuriating.

Vox walked to the radio. His bloody hand hovered over the dial.

One twist and the voice would stop. The broadcast would end. He could salvage the evening, maybe. Call Margaret, apologize, claim he'd been working late and lost track of time. Plan another night out.

His hand stayed frozen above the dial but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Couldn't turn it off.

"This is a problem," Vox said aloud.

The radio offered no response.

He grabbed his coat from the back of the chair. The cheap wool one that didn't keep out the cold but was all he had. Pulled it on with sharp, angry movements.

If he couldn't turn off the broadcast, then he'd leave. He'd walk. Clear his head. Get away from the apartment and the radio and the wall covered in evidence of his deteriorating mental state.

The broadcast continued as he walked to the door.

Vox paused with his hand on the knob.

Then he turned around, walked back to the radio, and turned up the volume. Loud enough to hear from the hallway.

Just in case he came back before midnight.

Just in case he missed something.

He left before he could think about the ridiculousness of it all.

- - -

The night air hit him like a slap.

Late autumn in the city was a special kind of miserable. Not cold enough for snow, just cold enough to cut through every layer of clothing and settle into your bones. The wind whipped down the streets, funneled between buildings, turning the urban landscape into a wind tunnel.

Vox shoved his hands into his coat pockets and started walking.

No destination in mind. Just away. Away from the apartment, away from the radio, away from his own spiraling thoughts.

The streets were mostly empty. A few people hurrying home. A couple arguing outside a bar. A taxi cruising past, its headlights cutting through the darkness.

Vox walked faster.

His hand throbbed where he'd cut it. The dish towel was probably ruined. He'd have to buy a new one, which meant spending money he didn't really have. Another small consequence of losing control.

The buildings blurred past. Storefronts with darkened windows. An all-night diner with flickering neon. A newsstand closing up for the night, the owner pulling down the metal gate with a screech of rusty hinges.

He kept walking.

The rational part of his brain was screaming at him to stop. To turn around. To go home and listen to the rest of the broadcast like he'd planned.

But the irrational part, the part that had been growing louder every day since waking up in this timeline, wanted to do something. Anything. Wanted action instead of passive observation.

He couldn't keep missing it. Couldn't keep being one step behind, one move too slow, always reacting instead of acting.

The mathematics didn't work. Alastor was everywhere and nowhere. Present and absent. On the radio and in the streets. And Vox couldn't figure out how.

He needed to see it. Needed to understand it. Needed to witness it with his own eyes instead of piecing it together from newspaper clippings and broadcast schedules.

His feet kept moving, carrying him east. Toward the river. Toward the radio station where Alastor broadcasted from.

The thought arrived fully formed, complete, like it had been waiting for him to catch up.

He could go there. Right now. Could stand outside and watch. Could see how Alastor managed to be in two places at once. Could finally, finally, get some actual data instead of speculation.

It was insane.

It was also the only thing that made sense.

Vox stopped on a corner, breathing hard. The wind cut through his coat like it wasn't even there. His injured hand ached. His feet were starting to hurt from the cheap shoes.

He looked down the dark street stretching ahead of him. Looked back the way he'd come.

The smart thing would be to turn around. Go home. Listen to the rest of the broadcast. Try again tomorrow, or next week, or whenever he had an actual plan instead of this manic compulsion.

But he'd been smart. He'd been patient. He'd been careful and strategic and it had been utterly, completely ineffective.

Vox gritted his teeth and started walking east.

Fifteen minutes in, his rationality tried one more time to assert itself.

This is insane, his internal voice said, reasonable and concerned. *You are walking across the city in the freezing cold to stare at a building. You should turn back. You should go home. You should think this through.*

Vox stopped on another corner. He sniffled, rubbing his nose. He couldn't feel his ears. His injured hand had gone from throbbing to a dull, constant ache.

He looked back down the street toward his apartment. Probably twenty minutes away by now. Forty minutes round trip of walking through weather that was actively trying to kill him.

For what? To stand there and watch a window?

"I'm already miserable," Vox said aloud, his breath visible in the cold air. "I might as well be miserable there."

He turned east and kept walking.

- - -

The radio station was a squat brick building that looked like it had been constructed sometime in the twenties and hadn't been updated since. Three stories. Narrow windows. A

small marquee over the entrance displaying the name in letters that had probably been bright once but now just looked intelligible.

Vox stood across the street, tucked into the doorway of a closed furniture store. The doorway provided minimal shelter from the wind. He pressed himself against the door, trying to use the shallow recess for protection.

It didn't help much.

The station's second floor window was lit. Vox could see movement inside. Shadows passing in front of the light. Equipment. People.

He couldn't see details from this distance. Couldn't make out faces or specific actions. Just shapes moving behind glass.

One shadow was taller than the others. It moved with a particular kind of confidence, gestures expansive and theatrical even in silhouette.

Vox's breath caught.

That had to be him. Had to be Alastor. The timing was right. The broadcast was still going. Vox could almost hear the voice in his head, overlaying the image of the moving shadow.

He watched.

Minutes passed. His feet went numb first, then his hands. His nose felt like it was going to fall off.

The shadow moved. Put something on what was probably a turntable. Picked up what might have been a glass. Drank. Set it down. Adjusted something. Maybe a microphone. The shadow's head tilted back. Laughing at something the other person in the room said.

It was agonizingly mundane.

No secret exit. No mysterious disappearance. No demonic rituals. Just a man doing a job. Broadcasting. Drinking water or coffee or whatever was in that glass. Being a normal human person in a normal human workplace.

Vox stood there for twenty minutes, shaking from the cold, watching absolutely nothing interesting happen.

"He's not killing anyone," Vox muttered, his teeth chattering. "He's just a fucking DJ. I'm freezing to death for nothing."

But he stayed anyway. Couldn't quite bring himself to leave. Kept thinking maybe something would happen. Maybe Alastor would do something revealing. Maybe the answer to the impossible alibi would present itself.

The shadow moved again. This time toward what looked like a door.

Vox straightened slightly, alert.

The second floor light stayed on, but the shadow disappeared. Maybe going to the bathroom. Maybe getting more coffee. Maybe just stretching his legs.

Or maybe...

The side door of the station opened.

Vox's heart stopped.

He pressed himself back into the doorway, trying to become invisible. Shadow. Nothing. Just part of the architecture.

Alastor stepped out onto the small concrete step. Not sneaking. Not looking around furtively. Just stepping outside like any person might when they needed a breath of fresh air.

He wore a dark suit, perfectly tailored. His hair was styled precisely. Even from across the street, even in the poor light from the streetlamp, he looked immaculate.

He took a deep breath of the freezing air. His breath misted in front of his face. He tilted his head back slightly, looking up at the sky. Or maybe just away from the confines of the studio.

Vox didn't breathe. Didn't move. Didn't blink.

It was too dark in the doorway. The furniture store's overhang cast deep shadows. Alastor couldn't possibly see him. The angle was wrong. The light was wrong. It was physically impossible.

Alastor turned his head.

Looked directly across the street.

Straight at the doorway where Vox was hiding.

Time stopped.

Vox's brain shut down. Every thought, every calculation, every carefully constructed plan evaporated. There was only the present moment. The eye contact that couldn't be happening but was.

Alastor's expression didn't change. The pleasant, neutral look of someone taking a break from work. No shock. No concern. No indication he saw anything at all.

But his eyes were pointed directly at Vox's position.

Then he turned. Walked back inside. The door clicked shut behind him with a soft, final sound.

Vox stayed frozen for another ten seconds.

Then his body caught up to his brain and he scrambled out of the doorway. His numb feet slipped on the wet pavement. He caught himself on a lamppost, metal icy against his palm.

Right as he willed his legs to move, to get out of there, the heavy main door of the station opened with a loud, metallic clank.

Chapter 14

Light flooded the street.

The station's main door had swung open with a heavy, metallic clank, and suddenly Vox was standing in a pool of yellow illumination like an actor caught on stage mid-scene change. The darkness that had hidden him seconds ago was gone, replaced by harsh, unforgiving visibility.

He froze.

Every instinct screamed at him to run, but his legs had turned to lead. His brain, usually so quick, had gone completely blank. There was only the light, and the open door, and the horrible certainty that he'd just made the stupidest mistake of either of his lives.

A figure stepped out.

Alastor descended the three concrete steps with unhurried grace, pulling on black leather gloves with the kind of careful attention most people reserved for important rituals. His coat was already buttoned, his collar turned up against the wind. He looked like he was preparing for a pleasant evening stroll, not stepping out into weather that was actively hostile to human life.

He saw Vox immediately.

Of course he did. Vox was standing directly in the light, soaking wet, one hand wrapped in a bloodstained dish towel, looking exactly like what he was: a man who'd been caught doing something he absolutely should not have been doing.

Alastor stopped at the bottom of the steps. His expression registered surprise, the kind you might show when encountering an acquaintance in an unexpected place.

"Vincent?" His head tilted slightly, like a dog hearing an interesting sound. "Is that you lurking in the shadows?"

Vox's mouth opened. No sound came out.

"I..." He tried again. His brain was running on pure panic. "I wasn't lurking."

Alastor's eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch. The smile stayed fixed.

Vox gestured vaguely at the street around them, his movements jerky. "I was just... walking. That's all."

"Walking." Alastor repeated the word like he was tasting it. "In this weather? At this hour?"

He looked up at the sky, where rain was starting to fall again in cold, miserable drops. Then back at Vox, his expression one of polite curiosity mixed with something that might have been amusement.

"It must have been quite a compelling walk."

Vox's brain finally lurched back to life, grasping desperately for any explanation that wasn't *I was stalking you like a deranged lunatic.*

"I was on a date," he blurted out.

Alastor blinked.

"A date." He said it slowly. "Well. Isn't that charming."

Vox nodded too quickly, too enthusiastically. He gestured down the street in what he hoped was a casual, this-is-totally-normal kind of way. "Just dropped her off at her place. Where she lives."

Stop talking, his brain screamed at him. *You sound insane.*

But he couldn't stop. The words kept tumbling out.

"So now I'm heading home. Because I live in that direction." He pointed vaguely west, which was actually true. "Just taking the scenic route. Getting some air. You know how it is."

Alastor studied him for a long moment. His eyes tracked over Vox's appearance with the methodical precision of someone conducting an inspection. The nice shirt, now plastered to his chest with rain and sweat. The dress shoes, polished that morning but now scuffed and water-stained. The coat that was trying very hard to be presentable but was losing the battle against the weather.

The visual evidence, miraculously, supported the lie.

"I hope it went well?" Alastor's tone carried genuine sounding interest. "Though you look a bit..." He paused, searching for the word. "Weathered."

Vox looked down at himself. He looked like a drowned rat that had been put through a washing machine and then ran over by car. His hair was plastered to his forehead. His clothes were soaked through. The dish towel wrapped around his hand was now pink with diluted blood.

"The weather turned," Vox said weakly. "Unexpectedly."

"Indeed." Alastor finished pulling on his gloves, flexing his fingers with the satisfied look of someone who'd completed a task properly. Then he produced an umbrella from somewhere, opening it with a soft whoosh of fabric. "I'm heading east myself. Would you care to share the pavement? It's dreadful to walk alone on a night like this."

The offer hung in the air between them.

Vox's first instinct was to refuse. To make some excuse and flee in the opposite direction before this situation could get any worse. And wasn't this exactly what he wanted anyway?

Besides, he thought to himself, *refusing would be suspicious.* It would make Alastor wonder why the friendly colleague from the coffee meeting was so desperate to avoid his company. Would raise questions Vox absolutely could not afford to have raised.

"Of course," Vox said automatically. "Since we are heading in the same direction anyway."

Alastor’s smile widened, but he didn’t adjust his umbrella. "Wonderful. Shall we?"

He started walking, and Vox fell in step beside him, squinting under the rain. The umbrella was large enough for two people if they stood *very* close together, but Alastor didn’t seem to notice... or care. Vox’s coat was quickly soaked once again, and he had to angle himself awkwardly to catch even a little of the umbrella’s protection.

Wow, Vox thought dryly. *You were always an ass, huh?*

The rain drummed against the fabric with a steady rhythm that should have been soothing, but was anything but.

They walked in silence for half a block. Vox kept his gaze straight ahead, hyperaware of every movement, every breath. Alastor hummed softly under his breath. Some jazz tune Vox

didn't recognize, carried with the easy confidence of someone who had absolutely nothing to worry about.

"So," Alastor said finally, his voice cutting through the rain and Vox's spiraling thoughts. "This date of yours. Was it a first date? Or have you been seeing this lucky lady for some time?"

Vox's mind raced. *First date or established relationship? Which would be more believable? Which would require fewer follow-up lies?*

"First date," he said, because that seemed safer. "We work together. At the station. She's in advertising."

That much was true, at least. He was building the lie on a foundation of actual facts, which was the only way to make it convincing.

"Ah, an office romance." Alastor's tone carried approval. "How delightfully classic. And how did she respond to your courtship? Favorably, I hope?"

"She..." Vox paused, realizing he'd backed himself into describing his relationship with Margaret. "She seems interested. We've been working together on a project. The Miller Brothers account. She handles the client relations, I do the research."

"A partnership of complementary skills." Alastor nodded. "Very sensible. One must strike the right balance, yes? Too much focus on work, and one misses the more enjoyable aspects of life."

The words felt weighted, as if he were testing the waters.

"Work is important," Vox said carefully. "But so is building personal connections outside of the office."

"Quite right. All work and no play makes for a rather dull existence." Alastor stepped over a puddle with practiced ease. Vox splashed through it. "Though I must admit, I'm surprised to encounter you in this particular neighborhood. Your date must live quite far from the station."

Vox's stomach dropped.

He had no idea what neighborhood they were in. No real sense of where Margaret actually lived. Sure, he had her address, scribbled down in his notepad, but he didn't know where exactly the street was. He'd just told Alastor he'd dropped her off, which meant he *should* know exactly where they were.

"She does," he said, keeping his tone steady. "Bit of a walk. But worth it. Talking while walking… good way to get to know someone."

Alastor made a small sound that might have been amusement. "Agreed."

They turned a corner. Vox recognized the street. Two more blocks and they'd hit the main avenue where he could make an excuse to split off toward his apartment.

Two more blocks of walking next to Alastor. Two more blocks of pretending he wasn't vibrating with cold and nervous energy and the horrible certainty that he was about to be caught in his lie.

"You're shivering," Alastor observed. "Perhaps you should have insisted on taking a cab. Chivalry is admirable, but not at the expense of one's health."

"I like walking," Vox said through chattering teeth. "Clears the head."

"Does it?" Alastor glanced at him sidelong. "And what thoughts require such vigorous clearing?"

Everything. The murders. The impossible alibi. The wall in his apartment plastered with evidence of his obsession with Alastor. Standing outside the radio station like a stalker, because he felt himself losing his mind.

"Work, mostly," Vox said instead. "The Miller Brothers account is important. Want to make sure we deliver."

"Ah yes. Your partnership with the lovely advertising woman." Alastor's tone was perfectly neutral. "Margaret, wasn't it? I believe I saw her at the network dinner last week. Quite striking."

Vox's brain short-circuited for the second time that night.

"You... saw her?"

"Briefly. She was speaking with Sterling near the bar." Alastor's smile turned knowing. "She has excellent posture. And a lovely laugh. I can see why you'd be drawn to her."

"She's very talented," Vox said, because that seemed safe. "Professional. Good at what she does."

They were having two conversations at once. The surface one, about dates and work and weather. And the underneath one, about something else entirely. Something Vox couldn't quite pin down but could feel pressing against his skin like static electricity. Alastor was curious, measuring, watching… For what, exactly?

The main avenue appeared ahead, its streetlamps casting pools of light on the wet pavement. Vox had never been so happy to see a major intersection in his life.

"This is my turn," he said quickly, gesturing left. "My apartment's just a few blocks that way. Thank you for your company."

He started to step away.

"Before you go," Alastor said suddenly, his tone casual but precise, stopping Vox in his tracks, "your hand. That towel isn't doing much anymore. You should have that looked at."

He was right. The dish towel had gone from pink to deep red, blood seeping through where Vox's cut had reopened during the walk.

"It's nothing," Vox said, forcing calm. "Just a small cut. I'll take care of it at home."

"At least wrap it properly," Alastor said, already turning. "Can't have you dripping all over the sidewalk. People might think there's been a murder."

He sounded light, joking, but Vox's blood went cold. He forced himself to laugh. It came out somewhat natural. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Do." Alastor adjusted his grip on the umbrella. "Well then. I should let you get home before you catch your death. The next broadcast is at ten tomorrow, and I'd hate to lose such a dedicated listener to pneumonia."

Vox frowned.

Dedicated listener.

The words were harmless enough on the surface, but Alastor was tossing them back at him, heavy with a meaning Vox couldn't quite parse.

"Yes. Tomorrow. Ten PM." His brain was stuttering again. "Good show tonight, by the way. The Ellington piece was excellent."

"You listened?" Alastor's eyebrows rose. "Even while on your date?"

Fuck.

"Before," Vox said quickly. "Before the date. Earlier. I tuned in for a bit before I left. Just the opening."

The lie was weak and they both knew it. Vox had just claimed he'd dropped Margaret off and was walking home afterward. The timeline didn't match.

Alastor's expression didn't change. The smile stayed fixed. But something in his eyes shifted, sharpened, like a camera lens focusing.

"How dedicated of you," he said softly. "To make time for both radio and romance in one evening."

"I'm efficient," Vox said.

"Clearly."

They stood there for another moment, rain falling around them, the umbrella keeping Alastor dry while Vox stood outside its protection, already soaked anyway.

"Goodnight, Vincent," Alastor said finally. "Do take care of that hand. And congratulations on your successful date. I hope there are many more to come."

He turned and walked away, the umbrella bobbing gently with each step. Within seconds he was just another silhouette in the rain, disappearing into the darkness.

Vox stood frozen on the corner, watching him go.

His hand throbbed. His clothes dripped. His entire body shook with cold and adrenaline and something else he couldn't name.

Alastor knew.

He didn't know what Alastor knew, exactly. Didn't know how much he'd figured out or what conclusions he'd drawn. But something in that conversation had been wrong. Off. Like they'd been playing chess while pretending to have a friendly chat, and Vox had just realized he was losing.

Chapter 15

The rain had been relentless that Friday night.

Alastor walked away from the shivering figure on the street corner, his umbrella shielding him from the worst of the deluge. He hummed a low, discordant tune under his breath, something that didn't quite match the rhythm of his footsteps, and allowed his mind to replay the encounter he'd just suffered through.

The man was a disaster.

Standing in a doorway at midnight, dressed in what should have been date-appropriate attire but looking like he'd been fished out of the river. Shaking like a leaf caught in a hurricane. And lying through his chattering teeth with the kind of desperation that would have been amusing if it weren't so pathetic.

Alastor tilted his head, listening to the slap of his own shoes on the wet pavement.

The story was absurd on its face. A date? On a night like this? Ending at midnight near a commercial radio station with no residential buildings in sight for three blocks in any direction? But the timeline was the real comedy.

Vincent claimed to have just dropped the lady off. Also claimed to have listened to the opening of the broadcast before leaving for said date. The broadcast Alastor had been performing live when Vincent was supposedly on his date.

Unless he'd brought a radio on his date, or the woman lived inside a speaker cabinet, the math was impossible.

A liar, Alastor mused, turning the corner toward his own neighborhood. *But not a very good one.*

The question was: what kind of liar?

Was he a threat? A detective who'd noticed the city's peculiar mortality patterns? Someone who'd connected dots that should have remained scattered?

Alastor considered it for a block, then dismissed the notion with a small, sharp exhale that was swallowed by the rain.

No. A detective would have had a better story. Would have prepared a cover that held up under the mildest scrutiny. A real threat would have had a weapon, or at least the spine to maintain eye contact. Vincent had looked frazzled. Not the controlled fear of a professional maintaining cover, but the panic of someone who'd been caught doing something embarrassing.

He'd had the desperate, wide-eyed look of a man caught in his underwear at a society dinner. Mortified but not dangerous.

The most likely explanation was far more mundane, and far more tedious: vanity.

Vincent had likely spent his Friday evening dining alone. Given the hour and the weather, the only establishment even remotely plausible was that mediocre Italian place on Fourth. He'd probably sat there nursing a glass of water, watching couples at other tables, then wandered the streets in a fit of melancholia - that particular brand of urban loneliness that drove men to walk aimlessly through the rain.

Or perhaps, and this seemed more likely given where he was standing, he had hoped to catch a glimpse of the local celebrity he claimed to admire so devotedly.

When caught, shame took over. Pride demanded a better story than "I was lurking outside your workplace like a sad little puppy." So he invented a date. Invented a social life. Invented normalcy.

A lonely man telling stories to the dark, Alastor thought, stepping onto his porch. *How boring.*

He shook out his umbrella with more force than necessary, scattering water across the wooden planks. Unlocked his door. Stepped inside to warmth and silence and the comfortable knowledge that Vincent Whittman was safe to ignore.

He was not a predator. He was not a threat. He was simply static. Background noise in a broadcast that had far more interesting frequencies to monitor.

He would be forgotten by morning.

Except.

Alastor paused in his hallway, one glove half removed.

There was a jagged edge to the man’s story that snagged in Alastor’s mind. Yet another detail that didn't fit the picture of the "Lonely Diner" Alastor had just constructed.

The bandage.

Vincent claimed he’d been at dinner. Closest place was an Italian place on Fourth. A proper establishment.

Alastor pulled the glove off slowly, his thumb brushing the smooth leather.

If he had cut his hand at a restaurant, he would use a napkin. Or a handkerchief. Or the establishment provides first aid.

He would not, under any circumstances, wrap his hand in a coarse, waffle-weave kitchen towel.

Alastor pictured the fabric again. Frayed edges. Cheap cotton. The kind of rag one keeps hanging on an oven handle, not tucked in a suit pocket for a romantic evening.

You weren't even at a restaurant, let alone a date, Alastor realized, a small, sharp smile touching his lips. *You were at home.*

Vincent had been in his own kitchen. He had injured himself, grabbed the nearest rag, and then sprinted out into the freezing rain to stand outside the radio station.

He hadn't been dropping off a date. Hadn't even been dining alone. He had come specifically, urgently, to watch *him*.

Obsession, Alastor decided, tossing the gloves onto the side table with a dismissive flick.

The "date" was a complete fabrication. Vincent was simply a lonely, frantic man who sat in his apartment listening to the radio until the urge to see the source became too strong to resist.

A fanboy. A stalker without the courage to actually approach.

How dreadful.

Alastor hung up his coat, the mystery solved to his satisfaction. Vincent Whittman definitely wasn't a threat. He was a moth throwing itself against a porch light, scorching its wings because it didn't know what else to do.

Safe to ignore.

He put the entire evening out of his mind. Some puzzles solved themselves if you just looked at the pieces long enough.

- - -

Monday morning, however, brought a revision to the data.

Alastor had arrived at the television station early, a concession to Jonathan Boucher's anxiety about the new advertising arrangements. They'd been negotiating the cross-promotion deal for weeks. Alastor's show would feature new sponsored segments. The television station would run promotional spots for his broadcast. Everyone would make more money. The mathematics were simple.

The execution, however, required Jonathan's signature on approximately forty seven different documents, each one requiring discussion, clarification, and hand-wringing about hypothetical scenarios that would never occur.

Alastor had intended to sign the paperwork, drink the terrible complimentary coffee, and leave before the boredom became physically painful.

Then he walked into the breakroom.

The scene that greeted him was, in a word, theatrical.

Vincent was there. And he was not alone.

He had cornered the advertising woman against the counter. Margaret, that was her name. The one Sterling had mentioned. The one Vincent had claimed to be courting.

Alastor paused in the doorway, one hand still on the frame, observing.

Vincent wasn't just standing near her. He was looming. His hand was clamped onto her shoulder with possessive weight.

He was leaning in close. Too close. Whispering something into her ear while simultaneously smoothing the collar of her blouse with a familiarity that made Alastor's skin crawl.

But Alastor had spent years reading body language. He had made it his business to dissect the microscopic tells that separated genuine emotion from cheap theater. And this display was nothing but bad acting.

The woman... Margaret, was it? Seemed oblivious. She was smiling, flushing a delicate pink, tilting her head to grant him better access. She leaned into the touch, clearly mistaking proximity for intimacy.

The problem was Vincent.

His smile was too wide, his movements were deliberate, like a puppeteer unsure of which string to pull next. But the main tell was in the eyes.

He wasn't looking at her.

He was looking past her. Over her shoulder. Toward the door they had just walked through. Toward the *audience*.

Good lord, Alastor thought, his own smile tightening into a grimace of distaste. *The man has no concept of personal space. He's clinging to her like a damp coat.*

It was cloying. It was suffocating. And it was, frankly, embarrassing to watch.

The realization clicked into place with satisfying precision.

The lie on Friday wasn't entirely a lie. It was aspirational.

Vincent clearly wanted this woman, or wanted something from her. Perhaps he'd been rejected. Perhaps the "date" he'd invented had been wish fulfillment, a story told to the universe in hopes it would become true. And now, seeing Alastor again, the witness to his humiliation, Vincent was overcompensating. Performing a pantomime of successful courtship to prove that he was, in fact, a desirable romantic partner.

It was pathetic.

"How cozy," he said, stepping fully into the room and letting his voice drip with precisely calculated disdain.

Vincent's hand released Margaret's shoulder immediately, like he'd been burned.

The woman flushed, but she looked pleased. Flattered by the attention, even the judgmental kind. She smoothed her blouse with quick, nervous movements.

Vincent's grin grew even wider.

"Margaret and I were just discussing the weekend," he said, his voice jumping up half an octave on the word "weekend."

I'm sure you were, Alastor thought dryly. *Likely the fictional version of it.*

Before he could respond, Jonathan Boucher appeared in the doorway behind him, looking harried and clutching a stack of papers.

"Margaret, there you are. I need you to look at the Henderson contract. There's a discrepancy in the payment schedule."

She nodded quickly, grateful for the escape. "Of course, Mr. Boucher."

She squeezed past Alastor with a murmured apology, not meeting his eyes. Vincent watched her go with an expression Alastor couldn't quite parse. Not longing. Not affection. Something calculating.

The room emptied. Just Alastor and the weatherman, standing in a breakroom that suddenly felt too small.

The air settled. The frantic energy of the performance dissipated, leaving behind an awkward silence that pressed against Alastor's ears like cotton.

Alastor adjusted his cuffs, preparing to leave. He had seen enough. The man was a lovesick puppy with boundary issues and delusions of romance. Pathetic, yes. Uncomfortable to witness, certainly. But ultimately it held no meaning to him.

He turned toward the door.

"So," Vincent said suddenly, his voice too loud in the quiet room. "The Blue Note. You mentioned the pianist was good."

Alastor stopped.

He didn't turn around immediately. Just stood there, hand on the doorframe, processing the non sequitur.

Why are we talking about this?

"Transcendent," he replied, his tone carefully neutral. He checked his reflection in the dark window, using it to observe Vincent without turning. "Though I imagine you were too occupied to notice the music."

He glanced meaningfully at the door Margaret had exited, offering Vincent an out. An easy deflection. *Go on. Tell me about your wonderful date. Bore me with romantic drivel so I can leave.*

But Vincent didn't take the out.

He pushed.

"We actually caught the end of the set," Vincent said, the words coming faster now. Eager. "Must have been right after you left. You cut it pretty close for the broadcast, didn't you? Leaving at... what, nine forty-five?"

Alastor turned slowly.

The specificity of the time. The casual way it was delivered, like an afterthought, but the calculation underneath was obvious. Vincent had done math. Had worked backward from the broadcast start time, estimated travel time, narrowed Alastor's departure window to a fifteen minute range.

Why?

"You seem fascinated by my itinerary, Vincent," Alastor said, keeping his tone light but letting the warmth drop from his voice. "Should I send you a schedule? Perhaps a daily log of my movements?"

Something flashed across Vincent's face. It was the same look from Friday night. He looked like a deer in the headlights.

"Just admiring the efficiency!" Vincent stammered, hands gesturing wildly. "I mean, I struggle to get anywhere on time. Chronic lateness, really. Did you somehow manage broadcast from a remote location? The signal quality was perfect. Usually there's degradation, but I didn't hear any dropoff at all."

Alastor watched him. Kept his expression pleasant and neutral. *Go on. Dig deeper.*

"And the gain levels were perfectly balanced despite everything," Vincent continued, words tumbling over each other now. "Usually remote feeds have a latency of at least three seconds. Sometimes five or six depending on the equipment. But you were synchronized instantly. Like you were already in the studio. It must be a new transmitter setup. High-grade equipment. Maybe a cardioid pickup pattern to minimize ambient noise from the street? Or possibly a shotgun mic, though those can be tricky with wind interference..."

Alastor went very still.

This was not the vocabulary of a weatherman. This was not the casual observation of an enthusiastic listener. This was technical. Precise. Specific. This was the language of someone who understood broadcast engineering at a professional level.

Someone who'd studied it. Someone who knew exactly what to listen for and how to analyze what they heard.

He's smarter than he looks, Alastor thought, the realization hitting him with the sharp clarity of a tuning fork struck at exactly the right frequency. *Much smarter.*

The "lovesick puppy" theory dissolved like sugar in hot water.

Puppies didn't know about transmitter latency. Puppies didn't analyze gain levels. Puppies didn't track someone's movements to the minute and then pretend it was casual admiration.

A smart man pretending to be dumb was always dangerous.

A smart man pretending to be a dumb lover while secretly tracking Alastor's schedule was a threat.

"Vincent," Alastor interrupted softly.

The man's mouth snapped shut.

"For a man whose job involves pointing at clouds and predicting drizzle..." Alastor took a step closer, deliberately invading Vincent's space. Close enough to smell the cheap aftershave. "You seem to know a great deal about broadcast engineering."

Vincent froze. For just a moment, just a fraction of a second, the mask slipped completely. Alastor saw something underneath. Something sharp and intelligent and deeply, fundamentally wrong.

Then it was gone. The harmless smile slammed back into place. The wide eyes. The self-deprecating shrug.

"I read manuals," Vincent said, the lie smooth but not quite smooth enough. "Hobby of mine. I just find the technical side interesting. How things work. The mechanics of it."

Liar.

Alastor studied him. Really looked at him this time, past the cheap suit and the nervous mannerisms and the carefully constructed facade of mediocrity.

The mismatched eyes that tracked movement with predatory focus. The twitch in his jaw when he lied. The way his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides like he was physically restraining himself from doing something.

There were layers here. Strata of deception piled on top of each other like geological formations. The doting boyfriend. The clumsy fan. The technical expert. Each one carefully constructed, each one slightly different, each one designed to deflect attention from whatever was underneath.

"You have many interests, don't you?" Alastor spoke quietly, leaning in until he was close enough to see the individual beads of sweat forming on Vincent's hairline. "One moment the doting lover, the next the technical expert. How exhausting it must be, keeping all those plates spinning."

Vincent's eyebrows furrowed.

He decided to push. To break something and see what spilled out.

"Though your performance as the doting lover needs work," Alastor said, letting his gaze drift deliberately to Vincent's hand. The hand that had been clamping down on Margaret's shoulder like a vise. "You were gripping that poor woman like a lifeline just now."

He looked back up, locking eyes with Vincent.

"Probably left bruises."

He waited for the reaction.

Vincent didn't look worried.

He looked annoyed.

It was brief, flickering across his face and disappearing before most people would have caught it.

Vincent glanced at his own hand. Not with guilt. Not with concern. With calculation. The expression of someone who'd made a technical error and was adjusting for it.

The romance was a prop. The fanboy persona was a costume. The nervous weatherman was a shell.

So who was the man underneath?

And more importantly, what did he want?

Alastor checked his pocket watch, using the movement to create distance and give himself time to think. The numbers meant nothing. He wasn't checking the time. He was hiding the spark of interest that had just ignited in his chest like a match struck in the dark.

"I have a schedule to keep," he said, his voice returning to its normal pleasant cadence. "Have a productive day, Vincent."

He walked out of the breakroom, the door swinging shut behind him with a soft click.

The hallway was empty. Quiet. Alastor stood there for a moment, listening to the distant clatter of typewriters and telephone conversations.

He could kill Vincent. The thought arrived fully formed, clinical and detached. It would be easy. A shadow in the hallway. A tragic accident on the stairs. A slip in the bathroom, head meeting porcelain at exactly the wrong angle. The building was full of opportunities, and Alastor knew exactly how to exploit all of them.

Vincent was a threat. Potentially. The smart move would be to eliminate the variable before it became a problem.

Alastor walked down the corridor toward Jonathan's office, his footsteps steady and unhurried.

For the first time in months, possibly years, Alastor was intrigued. Vincent Whittman wasn't static. Wasn't background noise. He was a variable. An unknown quantity. A wolf trying very hard to squeeze into sheep's clothing and doing a terrible job of hiding his teeth.

The question was: what kind of wolf?

A detective would have revealed himself by now. Would have made some official move, asked direct questions, shown his badge and his authority.

A rival killer would have been more careful. Wouldn't have revealed his knowledge so obviously. Wouldn't have gotten caught lurking like an amateur.

So what did that leave?

Alastor turned the corner, humming softly. The same discordant tune from Friday night, the one that didn't quite resolve properly.

A stalker? Possible. The location Friday night supported it. But stalkers were usually simpler creatures. More emotional. Less technical.

A spy? For whom? To what end?

An obsessive fan? That fit the surface behavior, but the intelligence underneath contradicted it.

No. Vincent was something else. Something Alastor couldn't quite categorize yet.

He reached the meeting room and knocked twice before entering. Jonathan looked up from a pile of paperwork, glasses sliding down his nose, papers scattered everywhere.

"Ah, Alastor. Good. Did you review the contract modifications?"

"Thoroughly," Alastor said, settling into the chair across from him. "Though I have one concern about the liability clause."

They talked business. Alastor signed papers. Made suggestions. Negotiated terms. Performed the role of responsible broadcasting professional with the ease of long practice.

But part of his mind stayed in that breakroom. Replaying the conversation. Analyzing each word, each gesture, each microscopic tell.

Vincent Whittman knew things he shouldn't know. Was interested in things he shouldn't be interested in. Was performing a role while hiding something underneath.

How refreshing, Alastor thought, signing his name with a flourish. *Someone interesting for a change.*

Chapter 16

The breakroom door clicked shut, sealing Vox in with nothing but the quiet hum of the refrigerator and the faint smell of burnt coffee.

He stood there for a moment, staring at the empty space where Alastor had been. The silence pressed against his ears, thick and heavy with the phantom weight of the Radio Demon's presence.

Then, slowly, a smile spread across Vox's face.

It started small. Just a twitch at the corner of his mouth. A microscopic crack in the Vincent Whittman mask. Then it expanded, widening, showing teeth. It wasn't the polite customer service smile he wore for Sterling. It wasn't the doting, eager smile he performed for Margaret.

This was something else entirely.

"He bought it," Vox whispered to the empty room.

His voice was barely audible over the refrigerator's mechanical wheeze, but the words felt monumental. Sacred.

He let out a short, sharp laugh. The sound bounced off the tile walls, coming back to him distorted and strange.

"He actually bought it." Vox turned to face the coffee pot, addressing it like an old friend. "'You probably left bruises.' He thinks I'm some brutish idiot who doesn't know his own strength. He thinks I'm a bad boyfriend. But a boyfriend nonetheless."

The relief was intoxicating. Better than any drug. Better than the rush of a successful broadcast or a closed deal. This was pure, uncut validation of his intelligence, his ability to manipulate, his fundamental superiority.

Alastor hadn't critiqued the lie. Hadn't questioned whether the relationship with Margaret was real. Hadn't asked for proof or poked at the obvious holes in Vox's story. He had simply critiqued the performance. Had looked at Vox's hands on Margaret's shoulders and seen exactly what Vox had wanted him to see: a desperate, possessive man marking his territory with all the grace of a gorilla.

"Idiot," Vox hissed, though there was no one to hear him. The word felt good on his tongue. Powerful. "Arrogant, analog idiot."

He pushed off the counter and walked toward the door, pausing to check his reflection in the glass of the microwave. His hair was slightly mussed. His tie had gone crooked during the conversation. He looked rattled. Nervous. Perfect.

He stared at his face framed inside the black square. Just a head in a box.

A laugh suddenly bubbled up, quiet and genuine.

He averted his eyes from the appliance, pushing the thought away.

Look at him, he thought to himself, adjusting his collar while picturing Alastor's retreating back. *Strutting around with that smile like he's figured out the secrets of the universe. He thinks he's so sharp. He thinks he sees right through me. He has no idea I'm running circles around him.*

The disappointment was there too, lurking underneath the triumph. In his memories, or his future, whatever the correct terminology was for recollections of events that wouldn't happen for decades, Alastor had been a titan. A rival worthy of obsession. Someone who operated on Vox's level, who could match him move for move, who made the game interesting.

But here? In the flesh? In this primitive timeline with its primitive technology?

He was just a man. A clever man, certainly. A dangerous man, absolutely. But still just a man. A man who could be fooled by a weatherman with a grudge and halfway decent acting ability.

"Even the monsters suck in this decade," Vox sneered at his reflection.

He straightened his tie one final time, smoothed down his jacket, and walked back into the newsroom with a bounce in his step.

Around him, the station continued its usual chaos. Typewriters clattered. Phones rang. Someone was arguing about ad placement near the water cooler. Sterling's door was closed, which meant he was either in a meeting or passed out drunk at his desk.

None of it mattered.

Vox sat at his desk, the adrenaline of the confrontation beginning to fade, leaving behind the crushing weight of reality. He had spent three weeks stalking a serial killer, doing Margaret's job for her, and living a double life. The sleep debt was no longer a number; it was a physical presence pressing against his skull.

Vox leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. Just for a second. The fluorescent lights were giving him a headache.

He took off his glasses. Rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Just five minutes, he thought.

He rested his forehead on his crossed arms. The desk was cool against his skin. The hum of the newsroom faded into a gentle, rhythmic drone. Just five minutes to recharge. To plan. To savor the victory.

The darkness came fast and heavy.

TAP. TAP. TAP.

The sound of someone knocking on his desk was sharp as a gunshot, reverberating straight through Vox's skull.

He jerked awake with a gasp, his heart hammering against his ribs. Disoriented, he pushed himself upright, blinking hard as the world swam without his glasses.

A figure loomed over his desk.

Vox fumbled for his glasses, shoving them onto his face with shaking hands. The world snapped into focus.

Alastor stood there.

He wasn't smiling his usual bright smile. He was looking down at Vox with an expression of mild, clinical curiosity, like a scientist observing a specimen that had unexpectedly stopped moving.

"Sleeping on the job, Vincent?" Alastor’s tone was playful, his voice pitched low enough not to disturb the rest of the office but loud enough to sound like a reprimand. "And here I thought you were the model of industriousness."

Vox scrambled to regain his composure. He wiped a hand across his mouth, checking for drool. *God, had he been drooling?*

"I wasn't sleeping," he lied, his voice thick with sleep. "I was... meditating."

"Meditating," Alastor repeated. A small, amused smile touched his lips. "Is that what they call it now? It looked remarkably like napping. You were even twitching."

He leaned in slightly, invading Vox’s personal space again.

"Exhausted from all that... romance, I suppose?"

The taunt hung in the air. Vox felt a flash of irritation cut through the fog. Even now, even when he was clearly winning, Alastor had to twist the knife.

"Something like that," Vox said, straightening his tie. "Can I help you, Alastor? Or did you just come down here to watch me sleep?"

"Tempting as that offer is," Alastor said dryly, "I have other things to do."

He reached into his coat pocket. His movements were slow, deliberate. He withdrew a cream-colored envelope.

He didn't hand it to Vox. He placed it on the desk. Then, using two fingers, he slid it across the surface until it bumped against Vox’s hand.

"A small query," Alastor said. "Since you seem to have such... strong opinions on the matter."

Vox looked at the envelope. Then up at Alastor.

"You wrote me a letter?"

"I prefer the personal touch." Alastor straightened, adjusting his cuffs. "Read it at your leisure. Though do try to stay awake long enough to finish it. Good day, Vincent."

He turned on his heel and walked away, moving through the bustling newsroom like a shark cutting through a school of minnows. People stepped out of his way without looking up, sensing the predator in their midst.

Vox watched him go. His heart was still racing, but the fog of sleep was gone, replaced by the sharp clarity of adrenaline.

He picked up the envelope. It was heavy. Expensive.

He opened it.

Vincent,

Our conversation regarding remote transmission protocols was illuminating. You spoke of technologies and methods that I confess remain theoretical to most in our industry.

If your understanding of such systems extends beyond mere recitation of manuals, I suspect we may have mutual interests.

Join me in the booth this Thursday evening, one hour prior to broadcast. If your expertise proves practical, I believe we could come to an arrangement that benefits us both.

- A.

Vox read it twice.

To anyone else, it might have looked like a polite professional courtesy. A radio host reaching out to a fellow broadcasting enthusiast. Innocent. Friendly. Maybe even a little patronizing.

To a paranoid man, someone who understood that Alastor was dangerous, it might have looked like a trap. An invitation to a secondary location. A chance to isolate and eliminate a potential threat.

But to Vox, riding the high of his earlier victory, it looked like something else entirely.

Submission.

It was an admission of defeat. Alastor had tried to corner him in the breakroom, tried to intimidate him with veiled accusations and invasion of personal space, and failed. Vox had countered with technical knowledge that Alastor hadn't expected. Had proven himself competent, useful, interesting.

And now? Now Alastor was reaching out. Was extending an olive branch. Was, in his own theatrical way, asking for Vox's help. His company.

Because he had finally found the one person in this primitive, backward city who actually understood the technology he was using. Who could speak his language. Who was worthy of his attention.

He needs me, Vox thought, a thrill of power curling warm in his gut. *Of course he does. I'm the future of media and he's playing with tin cans and string. He wants a consultant. He wants a peer. He wants someone who can appreciate what he's doing.*

The realization was intoxicating.

Vox leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers behind his head, staring at the water stained ceiling tiles. Around him, the newsroom buzzed with activity. None of it registered. He was too busy feeling like himself again.

He had done it. He had actually done it. In less than a month, he had gone from invisible coffee fetcher to indispensable asset. He had the biggest sponsors eating out of his hand. He

had the marketing manager dependent on him for her career success. And now, now, he had the Radio Demon himself inviting him into the inner sanctum.

The dopamine hit was almost dizzying. It rushed through his veins like static, making his fingers tingle.

"Look at you," he whispered to the ceiling. "Crawling back. Begging for scraps."

In the future Vox had offered partnership. He had extended a hand, offered to share his power, his vision, his empire. And Alastor had laughed. Had rejected him. Had called him weak.

And now?

Now Alastor was the one asking. He was the one reaching out with his little cream-colored envelope, fishing for secrets he couldn't understand on his own. He was admitting, in his own arrogant way, that he was limited. That he was trapped in his analog cage.

And he needed Vox to let him out.

"Thursday," Vox said to the empty air above his desk. His voice was soft, but there was steel underneath. "I'll be there. Don't worry, Al. I'll fix your little radio show for you."

He felt invincible. He felt like Vox again, not Vincent.

The feeling was addictive. Dangerous. It made him reckless.

Which meant it was time to clear the rest of the board.

He let his gaze drift across the newsroom, searching. *There*. Margaret was at her desk, frowning at a stack of invoices like they'd personally insulted her. She looked tired. Frazzled. Her mascara was slightly smudged. Her hair was coming loose from its pins.

She looked like what she was: an obstacle.

Vox's smile thinned, lips pressing together until they were barely visible.

She was clutter. Useful clutter for a while, certainly. She'd served her purpose, provided cover, made him look normal and non threatening. But her usefulness was expiring. Her shelf life had reached its end.

He had the Miller Brothers account locked down. Had proven himself capable of handling client relationships. Sterling trusted him. The executives had seen his work and been impressed.

And now that he had Alastor "handled," he didn't need a human shield anymore.

If he wanted to be an Executive, if he wanted to walk into that radio booth on Thursday as Alastor's equal instead of some lowly weatherman begging for scraps of attention, he needed the title. He needed the office. He needed Margaret's position.

Which meant Margaret had to go.

And she had to go now. Before Thursday. Before his meeting with Alastor. Before he took the next step up the ladder.

It would be poetic, he decided. Perfect, even. To walk into Alastor's booth on Thursday night as a grieving man, shaken by the tragic loss of his beloved colleague. Fresh from the funeral. Raw with emotion. It would add depth to the role. Complexity. Alastor would appreciate the performance. Would respect the commitment to character.

Vox pulled out his desk calendar, the cheap paper kind that Vincent had been using to track weather patterns.

He flipped to Wednesday. Ran his finger down the page.

Margaret was staying late. The quarterly review was due Friday morning, and she'd been complaining all week about how behind she was. She'd be the last one in the building, working past nine, maybe even ten. The security guard made his rounds at eight and then camped out in the lobby watching the door.

Perfect.

Wednesday night. Late. The building nearly empty. Margaret walking to her car alone through poorly lit streets.

Accidents happened all the time in the city. Muggings. Random violence. A woman in the wrong place at the wrong time.

No one would suspect him. Especially not when he was so visibly devastated by the loss and would no doubt come up with a perfect alibi.

Vox smiled at the calendar.

Two more days.

Chapter 17

Wednesday evening arrived wrapped in fog.

It rolled off the river sometime around six, thick and gray and suffocating. The kind of fog that swallowed streetlamps whole and turned the city into a maze of shadows and muffled sounds. The kind that made distances impossible to judge and footsteps echo from directions that didn't make sense.

Perfect weather for what Vox had planned.

He'd left the office at seven, making a loud, obvious show of it. Stopped at Sterling's office to remind him about tomorrow's forecast meeting, projecting his voice just loud enough that the secretary heard him through the open door. Chatted with Pauline from research about her weekend plans, making sure to mention he was heading home to catch up on sleep. Waved to Margaret, still hunched over her desk with that quarterly review spread out in front of her like a war map, and wished her luck.

"Don't work too late," he'd said, his voice carrying that perfect note of friendly concern that he'd practiced in the mirror. "You need your rest."

"Don't work too late," he'd said, his voice carrying that perfect note of friendly concern. "You need your rest."

She'd smiled at him. Tired but genuine. "I'll try. This report is killing me though."

"You'll do great. You always do." Vox had to try hard to keep his face straight, to keep his expression easy and reassuring. Her choice of words almost made him smile. He held her gaze, projecting warmth he didn't feel.

He leaned in, a final flourish for the office audience. "And maybe on Friday," he said conspiratorially, "we can go somewhere nice? To celebrate."

Her face lit up, nodding enthusiastically.

He gave her shoulder a final, encouraging squeeze. The perfect picture of a doting colleague. Anyone watching would remember this: Vincent was worried about her, planning a date with her.

A moment later, he'd walked past the security guard's station, made absolutely certain the man saw him leave, shared a commiserating sigh about the wretched fog, and stepped out into it.

But he didn't go home.

He walked two blocks west, just far enough to be out of sight of the building's entrance. Then he ducked into an alley, moving quickly through the service corridors he'd mapped over the past three days. Every loading dock, every fire escape, every blind spot in the building's security.

The thrift store coat he'd bought for this exact purpose was waiting where he'd stashed it that morning, tucked behind a dumpster in a plastic bag. Heavy gray wool, slightly too large, the kind of garment that made you invisible. He pulled it on over his work clothes, turning up the high collar to hide his face. The fedora followed, wide-brimmed, casting his features in deep shadow.

He looked like any of a thousand working men heading home after a late shift. Unremarkable. Forgettable. A ghost in the fog.

The key to the loading dock had been almost embarrassingly easy to obtain. He'd simply borrowed it from maintenance two weeks ago, claiming he needed to check some weather equipment stored in the basement. He'd made a wax impression, had a copy cut at a locksmith three neighborhoods away, and returned the original before anyone noticed it was gone.

The door opened with barely a whisper, newly-oiled hinges that didn't squeak. Inside, the building was quiet. The skeleton night crew was on the upper floors. The loading dock area was abandoned, dark except for a single bulb that cast more shadow than light.

Vox made his way to his position. Behind the dumpster. Where the shadows were deepest. Where he'd have a clear line of sight to the back stairs that Margaret would use.

He'd timed it perfectly. She always left through the back entrance when she worked late, avoiding the front lobby where the security guard would try to make sleazy conversation. She'd walk down those metal stairs, cross the loading dock, and head toward the street where the cabs were parked three blocks away.

Except tonight, she wouldn't make it to the car.

He settled in to wait.

The air here was thick with the smell of rot. Wet cardboard dissolving in puddles. Spoiled food from the building's cafeteria. Something dead, maybe a rat, decomposing somewhere in the darkness. Most people would have gagged. Would have found another spot.

Vox barely noticed. He'd smelled worse in Hell. Much worse.

A rat skittered past, its claws clicking on the wet pavement. It paused to look at him with beady black eyes that reflected the distant streetlamp. Vox stared back. The rat, apparently deciding he wasn't food or a threat, continued on its way.

Vox checked his watch. Eight forty-five. Margaret was punctual to a fault. She'd leave at nine, maybe nine-fifteen if she got caught up in the work. He had time.

He reached into a dark corner. His fingers closed around cold metal.

The lead pipe was heavy. Solid. He'd found it in a construction site three blocks from his apartment, just lying there in the rubble like a gift from the universe. It had rust on both ends, orange and flaking, but the middle section was clean. Strong. It would do the job.

He pulled it out. Weighed it in his palm. Tested the balance. The metal was cold enough to hurt, leeching the warmth from his skin even through his gloves.

He practiced the swing. Slow at first, getting the feel of it. Then faster. The pipe cut through the air with a satisfying whoosh.

Short, sharp, brutal. That was the key. Aim for the base of the skull where the spine met the brainstem. One hit to incapacitate. Maybe two to finish if the first wasn't clean. Then he'd take her purse, scatter the contents, rough up her clothes a bit. Make it look like a robbery gone wrong. A mugging. Random violence in a city that was seeing more and more of it lately.

The police would investigate, certainly. Would ask questions. But Vincent Whittman would have an alibi that was absolutely waterproof.

The police would ask where he had been. He would tell them he’d had dinner at Angelo’s, then caught a late movie. He would produce the receipt from Monday night, a crumpled slip of paper suspiciously missing the date stamp but not the time. Then the ticket stub for the nine o’clock showing of the new Hitchcock film. A ticket he’d bought the day before with every intention of never using it.

He had fabricated a ghost of himself, a phantom Vincent who had spent his evening enjoying a quiet meal and a film while the real one waited in an alley with a lead pipe. The paper trail was perfect. The logic, airtight.

By the time Margaret's body was found, Vincent Whittman would be blocks away, surrounded by witnesses, with documentation proving he couldn't possibly have been in two places at once.

He remembered this feeling. The anticipation. The focus. The way everything else fell away until there was only the plan and the target and the beautiful simplicity of cause and effect.

In his original timeline, he'd killed for the first time around this point in his career. Not out of passion or rage, but out of cold, practical necessity. Someone had been in his way. He'd removed them. The method had been crude, the execution sloppy by his current standards, but he'd learned from his mistakes.

He'd learned, too, that the smartest deaths never looked like murders at all. Tragic accidents. Public misfortune. A slip, a fall, a moment of terrible luck. People mourned accidents. They hunted killers.

This time would be different. This time he had decades of experience compressed into the mind of a man who supposedly had none. He knew what investigators looked for, what patterns they chased, which mistakes turned curiosity into certainty.

And yet.

Some small, inconvenient part of him still wanted the honesty of it. The intimacy. The directness of taking a life with his own hands. He missed it more than he cared to admit. Opportunities like this were rare, especially later on. He could easily get away with it now, before eyes lingered too long on him, before his name became familiar to the wrong people.

He might not get another chance like this.

But whatever he chose, he would not be careless.

He wouldn't make any of the mistakes that had taught him better.

He checked his watch again. Eight fifty-eight.

Any minute now.

He pressed himself against the brick wall, becoming part of the shadow. The pipe was warm now from his grip, the metal seemingly buzzing against his palm. *Ready*.

A door creaked open.

The sound cut through the fog like a knife. Metal hinges protesting. Then footsteps. Light. Quick. The sharp click-click-click of heels on metal stairs.

Vox's entire body went still. Not tense, but just still. Like a predator watching prey approach the waterhole. His breathing slowed. His heartbeat steadied. Everything unnecessary fell away.

This was what he was. This was what he'd always been, underneath all the masks and performances and desperate attempts to pretend he was something else.

A killer.

She appeared at the top of the loading dock stairs. A silhouette against the slightly lighter fog. She was clutching her purse to her chest with both hands, head down against the damp air. She looked small. Fragile. A collection of bones and bad fashion choices wrapped in a coat that was too thin for the weather.

She started down the stairs. One step. Two. Three.

Her heels echoed in the empty space. She was humming something. Some tune Vox didn't recognize. Probably from the radio. She sounded tired but not unhappy. Probably thinking about getting home. About a warm bath. About bed. About their date on Friday.

She had no idea she was about to die.

She reached the bottom of the stairs. Turned toward the street. The direction she'd have to walk to reach the cabs.

Twenty feet away.

Fifteen.

Vox stepped out of the shadows.

His movements were fluid. Practiced. There was no hesitation. No second thoughts. No moral quandary. This was simply a task that needed completing. An obstacle that needed removing.

He raised the pipe high. Muscles coiling. Calculating trajectory. Adjusting for her height. For the angle. For the fog that made depth perception tricky.

Ten feet.

Five.

Margaret was oblivious. Still humming. Still walking. Still thinking about whatever mundane concerns filled her mundane little life.

Three feet.

Goodbye, Margaret, Vox thought, and brought the pipe down-

CRACK.

The sound wasn't metal hitting bone.

It wasn't the wet crunch of skull fracturing.

It wasn't any sound that came from outside his body.

It was the sound of his own brain short-circuiting. His neurons firing in reverse. Every synapse in his body simultaneously screaming in protest.

White-hot agony exploded at the base of his skull. It felt like someone had shoved a live wire directly into his spinal column and cranked the voltage to maximum. Like his bone marrow had been replaced with molten glass. Like every nerve ending in his body had been dipped in acid and set on fire simultaneously.

This wasn't pain. Pain was too small a word. Too mundane. This was his entire existence reduced to one endless scream of pure, absolute agony.

His vision went white. Not gradually. Instantly. Like someone had reached into his brain and flipped a switch.

His lungs locked. Forgot how to process air. He couldn't breathe in. Couldn't breathe out. Just frozen, a statue of meat and bone and suffering.

His arm, mid-swing, seized rigid. The muscles contracted so hard he felt something tear deep in his shoulder. His fingers spasmed open, each one moving independently.

The lead pipe fell from his hand.

It hit the concrete with a deafening clank that echoed through the alley, bouncing off walls.

Vox didn't hear it. He was too busy feeling like he was about to die.

His legs gave out and he collapsed forward, no control over his trajectory. Hit the wet pavement face-first, his cheek smashing hard against concrete.

He tried to catch himself. Tried to move his arms. They wouldn't respond. They just lay there, useless appendages attached to a body that had betrayed him utterly.

He tried to scream but his throat was seemingly paralyzed. The scream was happening inside his head, bouncing around his skull with nowhere to go, building in pressure until he thought his brain would rupture from the force of it.

He lay in a puddle next to the dumpster. Twitching. Convulsing. The fall had injured something inside his mouth, blood leaked from the corner of his lips, mixing with rainwater and whatever else was on this filthy pavement.

Somewhere, distantly, as if through water, he heard a voice.

"Hello?"

Margaret. She sounded scared. Confused.

Vox's body jerked. Another spasm rolled through him like an electric current.

"Is someone there?"

Footsteps. Coming closer. The click of heels, more cautious now.

No, Vox thought, the word echoing in his paralyzed brain. *No, no, don't come closer.*

Margaret's silhouette appeared above him. She was staring down, trying to make sense of what she was seeing through the fog.

A man in a trench coat. Convulsing in the dirt.

"Oh god," she whispered. Her hand went to her mouth. "Are you drunk? Or... oh god, are you having a seizure?"

She backed away. One step. Two. Her eyes were wide. Frightened.

"I'm... I'm going to call for help!" She said it to the darkness. To the fog. To whoever might be listening.

Then she turned and ran.

Her heels clattered frantically on the pavement. The sound receded. Grew fainter. Disappeared entirely as she fled toward the main road. Toward lights and safety and people.

Toward survival.

Vox lay there.

The pain began to recede. Not quickly. Not mercifully. It rolled back like a tide going out, leaving him gasping and drenched in sweat in its wake.

He tried to move his fingers. They twitched. A small movement, barely visible, but it was something.

He tried to push himself up. His arms shook. Trembled like he was lifting the weight of the world. But they held.

He dragged himself to his knees, hung his head, and heaved. Nothing came.

"What..." The word came out as a wheeze. His throat felt like it had been scraped raw with steel wool. "What was that?"

He looked at his hands. They looked normal. Pale. Shaking. But normal. No burns. No marks. No evidence of what had just happened.

He flexed them. Rotated his wrists. The pain was gone. Completely gone. Like it had never existed. But the memory of it remained, branded into his consciousness.

He looked at the pipe. It was lying a few feet away. Innocuous. Just a piece of metal. Just a tool.

He reached for it.

Just thinking about picking it up. Just considering the possibility.

A warning spark behind his eyes. Not pain. Not yet. Just a reminder. A finger wagging in his brain. *Don't.*

He jerked his hand back as if it had just been burned.

His breathing was coming faster now. Panic starting to claw its way up from his chest like a living thing trying to escape. He forced it down. Forced himself to think.

He tried again. Reached out. Slower this time. Watching his own hand like it belonged to someone else.

His fingers got within inches of the metal.

This time the spark was harder. Sharper. It made his vision blur, nausea rolling through him in waves.

He pulled back again. Sat back on his heels.

The rain was falling harder now. Cold drops hitting his face. Running down his neck. Soaking through the thrift store coat.

He was surrounded by garbage. By filth. By the detritus of a city that didn't care about him or anyone else.

And the realization was hitting him. Slowly. Piece by piece. Each one a hammer blow to what remained of his ego.

He hadn't just been sent back. Hadn't just given him a second chance at redemption.

They had leashed him.

He slammed his fist into his own thigh. The impact hurt - a dull, bruising pain that would leave a mark. But the leash wasn't pulled this time. He could hurt himself. He was allowed that much.

He just couldn't hurt *them*.

The thought spiraled. Expanded. Filled his entire consciousness like ink spreading through water.

He thought about Margaret. Walking away unharmed. Untouched. Because he couldn't touch her. Physically could not raise a hand against her. His own body would betray him. Would shut down. Would torture him until he stopped.

He thought about all the careful plans he'd made. All the obstacles he'd intended to remove. Sterling. Margaret. Anyone who stood between him and what he wanted.

All of it impossible now. All of it blocked by his own nervous system turning against him.

He thought about Alastor.

Alastor, who killed freely. Who'd walked out of that studio Friday night and stabbed a man to death in an alley without a flicker of hesitation or divine punishment. Who moved through the world like the apex predator he was, unrestrained, unlimited, free.

While Vox couldn't even hold a pipe.

Vox laughed.

It started as a small sound. Then it grew. Expanded. Became something edged with hysteria.

He laughed at himself. At the irony of it all.

He'd thought he was the master. The player. The one moving pieces on the board. He'd felt so clever, so in control, manipulating Margaret and planning murders and believing he had Alastor wrapped around his finger.

But he wasn't a player. He was a piece. And not even a powerful piece. A pawn, maybe. Something that could only move forward.

The laughter died abruptly.

He dragged himself to his feet. Used the dumpster for support. His legs felt like they were made of jelly. His whole body ached, a bone deep exhaustion that had nothing to do with physical exertion and everything to do with the punishment still echoing through his memory.

He leaned there. Wiped grime off his face with a shaking hand. Tasted blood where he'd bitten his tongue.

Margaret was gone. She was safe. She'd be at work tomorrow, smiling, taking credit for his research, blocking his path to advancement. And he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

Not directly.

Not with his own hands.

Unless...

Vox's hand went to his pocket. His fingers, still trembling, brushed against paper. He pulled it out.

The cream-colored envelope. Slightly damp now. But intact.

The invitation.

He stared at the elegant handwriting. The careful loops and flourishes. Alastor's signature at the bottom, just a single letter. As arrogant and theatrical as always.

Vox couldn't kill Margaret. His hands wouldn't let him.

But Alastor's hands worked just fine.

He looked at the pipe one more time. Lying there in the filth. A tool he'd never be able to use.

Then he turned and limped out of the alley.

The thrift store coat went into a dumpster three blocks away, shoved deep under bags of restaurant waste. The hat followed, tossed into a different dumpster two blocks after that. He straightened his real clothes underneath. Smoothed his hair. Wiped his face with his handkerchief until the grime was gone.

By the time he reached the main street, he looked almost normal. Just a man who'd had a long day. Nothing more.

Chapter 18

The apartment door slammed shut with enough force to rattle the windows.

Vox stood in the entrance, dripping. His coat was soaked through. His shoes squelched with every step. There was still grime under his fingernails from where he'd fallen, and the taste of copper coated his tongue.

He locked the door. Both locks. Then the chain. Then he stood there for a moment, hand still on the knob, breathing.

The apartment was dark except for the faint glow from the floor lamp in the corner. The guppy swam its endless circle, completely oblivious to the fact that its owner had just experienced a complete and total psychological break.

Vox walked to the center of the room and stopped.

"No," he said to the empty room. "No, this is..."

He started pacing. Three steps to the fish tank. Three steps back.

"This is actually *perfect.*"

The guppy didn't respond.

Vox gestured wildly at it, his movements sharp and manic. "You don't understand. You think this was a failure? This was *strategic*. This was a calculated pivot based on new information."

He spun on his heel, pacing faster now.

"Why would I get my own hands dirty? I'm a *professional*. I'm an executive. Executives *delegate*. They don't do the grunt work themselves, that's what middle management is for!"

He stopped in front of the tank, jabbing his finger at the glass.

"And what's a serial killer if not the ultimate middle management? He's already doing the job! He's already proven he's competent! I just need to... to provide direction. Quality control. Strategic oversight."

The guppy swam past his finger, unimpressed.

Vox's eye twitched.

"I'm explaining something to you and you're just... photosynthesizing? Or whatever it is you do. Unbelievable."

He walked to the kitchenette, yanked open a cabinet, and pulled out the bottle of cheap whiskey he'd been saving for a special occasion. This seemed special enough. He poured three fingers into a glass, drank it in one swallow, and immediately regretted it as the cheap liquor burned its way down his throat.

He walked back to the fish tank, glass in hand.

"You know what? Fine. You want honesty? I'll give you honesty."

He sat down on the floor, back against the wall, legs stretched out in front of him. The fish tank cast weird shadows across the water-stained wallpaper.

"I fucked up. There. Happy? I completely, catastrophically fucked up. I had her. She was *right there*. And I couldn't even..."

His hand clenched around the glass.

"And you know what the worst part is? It's not even my fault. It's not incompetence or bad planning or getting caught. It's just... a rule. A stupid, arbitrary, divine bullshit *rule* that says I'm not allowed to be what I am anymore."

He took another drink, smaller this time.

"But that's fine. That's fine! Because you know what? This is *better*. This is actually a better plan. More elegant. Less risky. I don't have to worry about forensic evidence or witness statements or any of that tedious detective nonsense. I just need to aim the gun and let someone else pull the trigger. Or not even that. More like push someone in front of an active shooter!"

The guppy bumped into the glass near his face.

Vox tilted his head, studying it.

"Hey. Are you even listening to me?"

The fish stared at him with its dead, glassy eyes.

"Right. Fish don't have the brain capacity for active listening. Or any capacity, really. You're basically a biological mechanism for converting food into waste."

He tapped the glass. The guppy startled, darting to the other side of the tank.

"Sorry," Vox muttered.

He leaned his head back against the wall, staring at the ceiling.

"You know, I had a shark back home. Huge thing. Kept it in a tank in my office. Very cute. But the guests found it intimidating."

He swirled the whiskey in his glass, watching the liquid catch the light.

"Everything was way better in hell. My office was the size of this entire building. I had screens everywhere, thousands of them, all connected to my nervous system. I could watch the whole city at once."

His voice dropped.

"And now here I am. Talking to a fish. In a one room apartment that's falling apart at the seams. Working a job I'm overqualified for by several decades."

The guppy swam its circle.

“But that’s fine,” Vox said, taking another sip. “Because I’m going to fix it. I’m going to climb back up. And when I do, I’ll remember everyone who underestimated me. Everyone who thought I was harmless. And I’ll take you to the top with me. Better food, bigger tank, the works.”

He raised his glass to the tank.

"To upward mobility."

The guppy, wisely, said nothing.

- - -

Exhaustion hit him like a freight train somewhere around two in the morning.

Vox didn't remember deciding to sleep. One moment he was sitting on the floor, nursing his third glass of whiskey and enthusiastically explaining his five-year plan to the guppy. The next, he was face-down on the Murphy bed, still fully clothed, consciousness draining away like water down a sink.

The dreams came immediately.

He was in his office. His *real* office, all chrome and glass and screens stretching floor to ceiling. But everything was wrong. The screens were cracked. Sparking. Displaying nothing but static that made his eyes hurt to look at.

He tried to stand. Couldn't. His legs wouldn't respond.

He looked down.

His body was wrong. Distorted. Everything was shattered, the glass spiderwebbed with cracks. His suit was torn. Smoking. He could smell burning circuitry and melted plastic.

"My, my," said a voice behind him. "Haven't we been busy?"

Vox tried to turn his head. It moved in slow motion, like trying to swim through syrup.

Alastor stood in the doorway. His eyes glowed red in the dim light, and the air around him crackled with power. That horrible, oppressive static.

"You tried so hard," Alastor said, walking closer. His footsteps echoed wrong, each one landing with a sound like breaking glass. "All that effort. All those desperate attempts at relevance."

He crouched down, getting level with Vox's broken body sprawled on the floor.

"And where did it get you?"

Vox tried to speak. No sound came.

Alastor's already wide smile widened even further.

"Nowhere," he answered his own question. "It got you nowhere. Because you were never the player. You were always just another piece on the board. A broken one at that."

He reached out. His hand hovered inches from Vox's cracked screen.

"And broken things," Alastor spoke again, his voice full of venom, "belong in the trash."

He pressed his palm against the screen.

Everything went white with pain.

Vox woke up gasping.

His chest heaved. His heart hammered against his ribs hard enough to hurt. For a moment, he couldn't remember where he was. The apartment was too dark, too small, the ceiling too close.

He sat up slowly, his whole body shaking. His shirt was soaked with sweat. The clock on the wall said 4:17 AM.

He'd been asleep for two hours.

He swung his legs off the bed and sat there, head in his hands, breathing. The dream was already fading, details blurring, but the feeling remained. That horrible, visceral sense of powerlessness. Of being broken and small and completely at someone else's mercy.

He hated it.

He stood on shaking legs and walked to the kitchenette. Poured another drink. His hands were still trembling, making the whiskey slosh in the glass.

He couldn't go back to sleep. Didn't want to. Didn't want to risk seeing that smile again, hearing that voice, feeling that crushing weight of failure.

He walked to the armchair and sat down hard. The floor lamp glowed in the darkness, providing just enough light to see by.

The guppy was awake. Or maybe it never slept. Vox didn't actually know if fish slept.

He stared at it for a long moment.

Then he started talking.

"I hate him," Vox said quietly. The words felt important. Like an oath. "Sometimes I feel like I forget how much I hate him. How much I *really* hate him."

He took a drink.

"And you know what? I tried to kill him. Multiple times. Never worked. No matter what I did, no matter how I planned, he won."

He laughed, but there was no humor in it.

"But that was hell. Different rules. He had power there. Was practically untouchable. But here?"

He leaned forward, staring at the fish like it was a co-conspirator.

"Here he's just a man. Flesh and bone. No demonic powers. No reality-warping bullshit. Just some guy with a knife."

He set down his glass and started gesturing as he talked, his movements sharp and precise.

"So here's what we're going to do. We're going to make him kill Margaret. But we're not just going to point and walk away. No, no. We're going to *watch*. We're going to be close enough to see it happen. And when he does it, when he gets sloppy or makes a mistake or leaves evidence, and he *will*, because he always gets too theatrical, always has to make a show of it, we're going to take note."

The plan was crystallizing as he spoke, pieces falling into place with satisfying clicks.

"A bloody handkerchief. A dropped button. A witness who saw him in the area. Anything. We collect it. We document it. And then..."

He smiled.

"And then we wait. I get Margaret's position. Her office. Her salary. I establish myself. Build my reputation. Become untouchable. And *then*, when I'm secure and he's comfortable, when he thinks he's gotten away with it..."

He mimed picking up a phone.

"'Hello, police? I have some information about the Margaret Holloway murder.'"

The guppy bumped into the side of the tank.

Vox laughed.

"You see the beauty of it? He goes to prison. He rots in a cell. And every single day he's in there, he's losing ground. You want to know why he got so powerful in Hell? Why he became an Overlord almost immediately after dying?"

He leaned toward the tank like he was sharing a secret.

"I have a theory it's because he killed *lots* of people. There has to be some kind of point tally."

He looked at the fish.

"But if he's locked up here? Miserable? Unable to kill? He gets nothing more. And when he finally dies from natural causes, old age, or more likely..."

His smile widened.

"More likely the electric chair. Maybe I can arrange that. A little testimony here, a little evidence there. Make sure the sentence is capital."

He stood up, too energized to sit still anymore, and started pacing again.

"Can you imagine it? I'll be his only visitor. I'll bring him newspapers and tear out every page except the ones with my face on them. 'Vincent Whittman Opens Fifth Station.' 'Whittman Broadcasting Acquires National Network.' 'Vincent Whittman, Media Mogul, Nominated for 'Sexiest Man Alive.' I'll tell him about my success. About how well I'm doing. About how I couldn't have done it without his help."

He was talking faster now, the words tumbling over each other.

"And then the execution. I'll be there for that too. Front row seat. I'll watch them strap him in. Watch them attach the electrodes. And right before they pull the switch, I'll make sure he's looking at *me*."

He spun on his heels, expression gleeful.

"And then—*ZAP!* " He mimicked the sound of an electric current, throwing his hands up. "Lights out. Dead as a doornail. Off to hell."

He stopped pacing and turned to face the fish tank.

"But here's the best part. Here's the *best* part. When he gets to Hell? He's got nothing. No reputation, no power. He's just another sinner. Weak. Pathetic. A nobody."

He walked closer to the tank, his reflection distorting in the curved glass.

"And when I finally go back to hell, he will be waiting for me. 'Hello, Alastor. Can I interest you in a janitorial position? I hear my company has an opening. The pay is shit but the humiliation is *priceless*.'"

He was laughing now, the sound bouncing off the walls.

He tapped the glass.

"Oh, or, *or* I could hire him as my assistant. Make him fetch *my* coffee. Draw *my* weather maps. 'Alastor, the pressure system isn't going to chart itself. Chop chop.'"

The guppy swam away from his finger.

"I'll be the one with the reach and the influence. I'll be the one everyone fears. And he'll be... what? A background character? Some pathetic sinner I can step on whenever I feel like it?"

The thought made him genuinely happy. He could feel the tension in his chest loosening, the nightmare fading.

"God, that's good. That's *so* good. He'll know. He'll remember what he was, what he could have been, and he'll know it's all my fault. That I took it from him. That I won."

The guppy swam its circle, completely unimpressed.

The apartment was starting to lighten with pre-dawn gray. He should try to sleep for another hour before work. Should at least change clothes, wash his face, try to look presentable.

Instead, he walked to the wall where he'd been building his Alastor's crime map and added a new note in small, precise handwriting:

Thursday: Assessment. Friday: Employment. One week: Collection of evidence. Two weeks: Police.

He stepped back, admiring the timeline.

It was perfect. Elegant. Poetic, even. He would use Alastor's own nature against him. Would let him do what he did best and then would destroy him with it.

Behind him, the guppy continued its endless swimming. Around and around in its small glass prison, free in the only way it knew how to be.

Vox watched his reflection in the window as the sun started to rise. He looked terrible. Pale. Exhausted.

But at the same time he had never felt more clearheaded in his life.

He finally walked to the Murphy bed and lay down, still fully clothed. This time when he closed his eyes, he dreamed of electric chairs and newspaper headlines and Alastor learning what it meant to be powerless.

Chapter 19

Vox arrived at work Thursday morning feeling like he'd been hit by a truck, reversed over, and then hit again for good measure.

His head throbbed with each step. His mouth tasted like something had died in it, decomposed, and then been reanimated just to die again. The inside of his cheek was swollen where he'd bitten it during the fall, a constant reminder of last night's spectacular failure every time he tried to swallow.

He'd gotten maybe three hours of sleep. Four if he counted the time he'd spent passed out in the armchair with an empty whiskey bottle at his feet.

The fluorescent lights in the building's lobby were especially offensive today. He squinted, pushed through the doors, and headed for the elevator with the grim determination of a man marching to his execution.

At least there was no bruising on his face. He'd checked three times in the mirror this morning, paranoid that the last night's escapade had left visible evidence. But his cheek looked fine. Normal.

The universe's one mercy.

He made it to his desk without incident. Set down his briefcase. Loosened his tie slightly. The newsroom was already buzzing with its usual morning chaos. Typewriters clattered. Phones rang. Someone was arguing about the lunch menu near the supply closet.

Vox pulled out his weather reports and tried to focus on the pressure systems moving in from the Great Lakes.

Then he heard her voice.

"...and I'm telling you, Susan, it was terrifying."

Margaret.

Vox's head snapped up despite the immediate protest from his hangover.

She was standing by the coffee machine with another woman. Blonde, early thirties, wearing a dress that screamed church volunteer and PTA president. Susan, apparently.

"Of course it was terrifying!" Susan's voice was climbing in pitch, approaching frequencies only dogs could hear. "Margaret, you could have been mugged! Or worse!"

"I know, I know." Margaret was seemingly trying to make herself look smaller, more vulnerable. Hunched shoulders. Hands wrapped around her coffee cup. "And then he just fell over I think. I thought he was having a seizure at first, but then I saw the... the pipe."

Vox's fingers tightened on his pencil.

"A pipe?" Susan's hand went to her mouth. "Oh my god. Did you call the police?"

"I ran to the main street and found a payphone. By the time they got there, he was gone. They said it was probably just a drunk, but..." She trailed off, shaking her head with exactly the right amount of residual fear.

Vox set down the pencil very carefully, lining it up parallel to the reports. His hangover had temporarily receded, replaced by the sharp clarity of crisis management.

This was fine. This was manageable. Margaret thought she'd encountered a random drunk in an alley. There was no description. No identification. Just a vague story about a man with a pipe who'd disappeared into the fog.

Just a drunk. Not a would-be murderer. Not her coworker. Not Vincent, who'd been planning to cave in her skull.

Just a drunk.

He could work with this.

Vox stood, his chair scraping against the linoleum with a sound that made his headache spike. He smoothed down his shirt, which had a small coffee stain from this morning that he'd tried and failed to scrub out. Arranged his face into an expression of concern mixed with appropriate protectiveness.

The Vincent mask was getting easier to wear. Or maybe he was just getting more desperate.

He walked over to the coffee machine, weaving between desks. Pauline from research gave him a curious look as he passed. He flashed her a bright smile, the automatic kind that didn't reach his eyes, and kept moving.

"Margaret?" He let his voice carry just the right amount of worry, pitched loud enough that Susan would hear. "Is everything alright? I heard..."

He trailed off, letting the implication hang. *I heard something terrible happened and I'm so concerned I rushed right over.*

Margaret turned and her face lit up the moment she saw him.

"Vincent! Oh, I was going to tell you." She reached out, touching his arm. Her hand was warm through his shirt sleeve. "Something happened last night after work."

Susan was looking at him with the assessing gaze of a woman determining whether this man was worthy of her friend. Her eyes tracked from his face to his coffee-stained shirt to his shoes, which he'd forgotten to polish. Vox could feel the weight of her judgment.

He straightened his posture unconsciously, pulled his shoulders back. Made himself taller. More imposing. More respectable.

"What happened?" He shifted closer to Margaret, angling his body to create the illusion of protective proximity. Close enough that he could smell her perfume. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, but..." Margaret launched into the story again.

Vox watched her face as she talked. The way her eyes widened slightly when she got to the part about the pipe. The way her voice trembled, genuine fear mixed with the excitement of having a dramatic story to tell. The way she unconsciously leaned toward him, seeking comfort.

"...and by the time the police arrived, he was just gone," Margaret finished. "Disappeared into the fog like a ghost."

Susan made a noise that was half gasp, half theatrical shudder. "Margaret, that's horrifying."

"I know." Margaret's grip on Vox's arm tightened. "I've been thinking about it all morning. What if he hadn't been incapacitated? What if he'd actually attacked?"

Vox felt his eye twitch. The question was uncomfortably close to reality.

"But he didn't," Vox said, his voice firm and reassuring. "You're safe. That's what matters."

Susan's expression shifted, her concern morphing into something sharper. She turned on Vox with the fury of a woman who'd found a target for her righteous indignation.

"Vincent." Her tone was accusatory, pointing at him as if he were the culprit. "You need to take better care of her."

Vox blinked, genuinely caught off guard. "I'm sorry?"

"She was working late. All alone." Susan's hands were on her hips now. "And she nearly had something happen! What kind of man lets his woman walk by herself at night in this city?"

The words "his woman" hit Vox like a physical blow.

His brain stuttered. He looked at Margaret, searching her face for some sign that she was going to correct this misunderstanding.

She wasn't correcting it.

She was blushing. Looking pleased. Her fingers were still on his arm, and she was leaning into him slightly, like she was claiming territory.

The Vincent mask slammed into place so fast it gave him whiplash. He schooled his expression into something appropriately guilty and concerned, with just a hint of protectiveness.

"You're absolutely right." The words came out smooth, earnest. He took Margaret's hand, the one that had been clutching his arm, and held it between both of his. Her skin was soft. He could feel her pulse. "I should have stayed. I should have walked you out. Margaret, I'm so sorry."

Margaret's eyes went soft. "Vincent, you couldn't have known..."

"That doesn't matter." He squeezed her hand gently, maintaining eye contact. "From now on, I'm walking you to the cab stand every night you work late. No exceptions."

He paused, letting righteous anger color his tone. The kind of anger a protective boyfriend would feel. "And if anyone tries anything..." He let the implication hang, unfinished. *I'll handle it. I'll protect you.*

Susan's expression transformed from accusatory to approving in an instant. "Well, finally. A true gentleman."

Margaret was positively glowing now. Her whole face had lit up, and she was looking at him like he'd just offered her the moon. "Vincent, you don't have to..."

"I insist." He brought her hand up, nearly kissing it, then seemed to reconsider and just squeezed it instead. Appropriate public affection. Not too much. Just enough. "I can't have anything happen to you."

The words flowed so smoothly it startled him. He was getting dangerously good at this.

Susan pressed a hand to her chest. "Oh my, Margaret! You're so lucky."

This was not part of the plan. This was the opposite of the plan. The plan had been to kill her and take her job. Not to become her boyfriend and walk her to cabs and hold her hand in front of gossipy coworkers.

But he was in it now. Committed. And there was no graceful way out that wouldn't make him look suspicious or, worse, like an asshole who'd broken poor Margaret's heart.

Susan was still watching them with that satisfied expression one wore when they believed they'd successfully meddled in someone's love life. "Speaking of which," she said, her tone turning gossipy, "there's a church bake sale this Sunday. Margaret, you simply must come!"

Margaret's eyes lit up. "Oh, I'd love that!"

Vox felt his smile falter for just a fraction of a second before he caught it. A church bake sale. Of course. Because this morning wasn't already enough of a disaster.

"And Vincent," Susan continued, turning to him with a smile, "you should come too. It'll be so nice to see you both there."

Every alarm bell in Vox's head started ringing at once.

He opened his mouth to politely decline. To make up some excuse about work or prior commitments or a sudden allergy to baked goods. Literally anything that would get him out of spending his Sunday at a church surrounded by people who probably had working moral compasses.

But Susan was looking at him. Really looking at him. Testing him. Measuring whether he was good enough for her friend.

And Margaret was looking at him too, hopeful and excited.

"You do go to church, don't you Vincent?" Susan's tone was light but the question underneath was heavy with implications. "You are a believer?"

He was trapped.

If he said no, he'd look like a heathen. A bad influence. Someone Margaret shouldn't be associating with. Susan would make her disapproval known, loudly and to anyone who

would listen, and Margaret, who clearly valued her friend's opinion, would start to question whether Vincent was really the right man for her.

Vox's smile never wavered. "Of course I am. I'd be delighted to come."

Susan clapped her hands together, delighted. "Wonderful! It starts at ten. Don't be late. The good cookies go fast."

She leaned in conspiratorially. "And between you and me, Mrs. Henderson makes these lemon bars that are absolutely divine. But you have to get there early or the church organist hoards them all."

"Lemon bars," Vox repeated, his smile so wide it hurt. "I'll make sure we're early."

I'm going to die, his internal monologue supplied helpfully.

"I should get back to my desk," Susan said, checking her watch. "But I'm so glad we had this chat. Margaret, you'll call me later?"

"Of course."

Susan walked away with a little wave, her heels clicking on the linoleum.

The moment she was out of earshot, Vox felt some of the tension leave his shoulders. He was still holding Margaret's hand. He realized this with a start and almost dropped it, then caught himself.

Boyfriends didn't drop their girlfriends' hands like they were contaminated. Boyfriends held on.

He held on.

"You're sure you don't mind?" she asked. "About Sunday? I know church isn't everyone's thing..."

"Not at all." The lie came easily. "It sounds lovely."

How awkward, he thought, his smile never faltering. *A church date. I'm going to die and go to double hell.*

"Besides," he added, because Vincent would say something sweet here, "any excuse to spend time with you."

"That's so sweet," Margaret managed, her voice thick with emotion.

She squeezed his hand one more time, then seemed to remember they were standing in the middle of the newsroom where anyone could see. "I need to get back to work. But Vincent? Thank you. For everything."

She walked away, practically floating. Several people watched her go, then looked at Vox with knowing smiles.

Vox stood there for a moment, staring at the space where she'd been. His hand, the one she'd held, felt contaminated. He resisted the urge to wipe it on his pants, to scrub away the warmth of her skin and the weight of her expectations.

"Mr. Whittman?"

He turned. One of Sterling's assistants, a nervous young man whose name Vox never bothered to remember, was hovering nearby. The kid looked like he was about to wet himself, which was his natural state whenever Sterling sent him to fetch someone.

"Mr. Sterling wants to see you." The assistant's voice cracked slightly. "And Miss Holloway. In his office."

Vox's stomach dropped. "Both of us?"

"Yes sir. Right away, he said." The kid emphasized the 'right away' part, his eyes wide. Sterling had probably yelled it at him.

Margaret reappeared at his elbow before Vox could respond, looking curious but not worried. "Did you hear? Sterling wants to see us."

"Apparently."

They walked to Sterling's office together. The hallway seemed longer than usual. Vox's headache was coming back with a vengeance, and every step made his skull throb.

Margaret was humming under her breath. Some cheerful tune that made Vox want to scream. She seemed completely unconcerned about being summoned to Sterling's office, which meant she was either remarkably brave or remarkably stupid.

Vox was leaning toward the latter.

They reached the door. Margaret knocked, her knuckles rapping twice against the frosted glass.

Sterling's voice, gruff and impatient, barked from inside. "Enter!"

Margaret pushed open the door and Vox followed her in.

The office was a disaster as always. Papers covered every surface. Coffee rings marked the desk like tree rings, documenting years of poor decisions. The air was thick with cigar smoke that made Vox's nose burn.

Sterling sat behind his desk. His shirt was wrinkled, his tie askew. There was a stain on his collar that might have been egg or might have been something worse.

"Sit," he said, not looking up from whatever he was reading.

They sat.

The chairs in front of Sterling's desk were deliberately uncomfortable. Too low, so you had to look up at him like a supplicant. The padding was worn through in places, springs poking through the fabric. It was a power play so obvious it bordered on parody.

Vox sat and resisted the urge to adjust his position. Discomfort would show weakness. He sat perfectly still and waited.

Sterling finished reading. Set down the paper with deliberate slowness. Fixed them both with a look that Vox couldn't quite interpret.

Was it approval? Suspicion? Indigestion? With Sterling, it was genuinely hard to tell.

"The Miller Brothers," Sterling said finally, his voice carrying the weight of a pronouncement, "are very happy."

Margaret brightened immediately. "Oh, that's wonderful!"

"They specifically mentioned you. Again." Sterling pointed his cigar at Vox. Ash fell onto the papers on his desk. He didn't seem to notice or care. "Said you were the most competent person they'd dealt with in years. Very impressed by your technical knowledge."

Vox kept his expression appropriately humble, even as something warm and satisfied unfurled in his chest. "I'm glad I could help."

"Help." Sterling snorted, a wet sound that made Vox's stomach turn. "Son, you did more than help. You closed a deal that's going to keep this station afloat for the next year. Maybe two if we play it right."

He leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking ominously under his weight. "Miller Brothers usually play hardball with their contracts. Nickel and dime everything. But they were practically throwing money at us. Said it was because they trusted you."

Vox allowed himself a small smile.

"The data was solid." Sterling jabbed his cigar in Vox's direction again. "It was exceptional. And they know it."

Margaret leaned forward, her voice taking on that particular quality of a woman who sensed an opportunity and was going to seize it with both hands. "Mr. Sterling, if I may..."

Sterling waved his cigar in a gesture that might have been permission or might have been irritation. "Go ahead."

"Vincent's been working very hard. Not just on this account, but on everything." She glanced at Vox, then back at Sterling. Her voice was earnest, genuine. "He stays late, comes in early, handles tasks that are well beyond his job description. He even helps other departments when they need it."

Vox kept his face neutral, but internally he was recalculating. What was she doing? This wasn't part of any plan. This was completely off-script.

"I really think he deserves to be recognized for that," Margaret continued. "Officially."

Sterling's eyebrows rose. "You suggesting a promotion?"

"I'm suggesting," Margaret said, her voice sweet, "that Vincent is currently doing the work of someone two pay grades above him. And he's doing it better than any of my assistants ever have."

The silence that followed was heavy.

Vox sat very still. He hadn't expected this. Hadn't planned for Margaret to advocate for him. The irony was not lost on him that the woman whose skull he'd been about to crack open like an egg was fighting for his promotion.

The universe had a twisted sense of humor.

Sterling leaned back in his chair, the leather protesting even louder. He fixed Vox with a calculating look.

"A promotion, huh." He chewed on his cigar, rolling it from one side of his mouth to the other. "That's a big ask, Miss Holloway."

"With respect sir," Margaret said, and her voice had that steel underneath that surprised Vox, "it's not an ask. It's an observation."

Sterling's eyebrows climbed higher.

"If Vincent leaves for another station, which he could, easily, based on his performance..." She paused, letting that sink in. "We lose not just a talented employee but all the institutional knowledge he's built. The Miller Brothers specifically requested him for future communications. That's leverage we can't afford to lose."

Oh, she's good, Vox thought.

She was threatening Sterling. Politely. Sweetly. But definitely threatening him. *Give Vincent a promotion or risk losing him and the Miller account.*

Sterling's expression darkened. "You threatening me, Miss Holloway?"

"Not at all." Margaret's smile never wavered. "Just pointing out the reality of the situation. Good employees have options. I'd hate to see Vincent exercise his."

The room went quiet except for the distant clatter of typewriters from the newsroom.

Sterling's cigar had gone out. He didn't relight it. Just chewed on the unlit end, staring at Margaret like he was seeing her for the first time.

Finally, he grunted. Took the cigar out of his mouth. Pointed it at Vox again.

"You want a promotion, son?"

Every fiber of Vox's being screamed yes. *Yes, obviously, absolutely, give me the title and the money and the office and everything else I deserve. Give me what I've earned through blood and sweat and staying up until three in the morning doing research that should have taken a team a week.*

But Vincent wouldn't say that. Vincent would be modest. Grateful but not desperate. Ambitious but not aggressive.

"I want to continue doing good work for the station," Vox said carefully, measuring each word. "If that work merits additional responsibility, I'd be honored to take it on."

"Political answer." Sterling's mouth twitched, his expression one of approval. "Smart. Alright, here's what I'm willing to do."

He leaned forward, planting his elbows on the desk. The gesture scattered papers everywhere. He didn't notice.

"I can't change your title. But what I can do is give you a small raise, not much, but it's something. You'll keep doing the research, but you'll also start handling client meetings with Miss Holloway here."

Margaret clapped her hands together, the sound sharp in the small office. "Oh, that's wonderful!"

Sterling held up a hand, silencing her celebration. "But." He fixed Vox with a hard stare. "This stays quiet. You understand? I don't want every Tom, Dick, and Harry in this building coming to me asking for raises because you got one."

He jabbed his finger at Vox for emphasis. "You keep your mouth shut, do your work, and we'll see about a bigger promotion down the line. You prove you can handle this responsibility, maybe in six months we talk again. You start getting cocky or lazy, the promotion disappears. Understand?"

"Understood," Vox said, his voice steady.

"Good. Now get out. Both of you. I have actual work to do." Sterling was already looking back at his papers, dismissing them.

They stood. Margaret practically dragged Vox out of the office, her hand clamped around his wrist like a vice. She barely waited until the door closed before she grabbed both his arms, bouncing slightly on her heels.

"Vincent! A promotion! Oh my god, I'm so happy for you!"

Her enthusiasm was genuine. Completely unfiltered. She was thrilled, her face flushed with excitement, her eyes bright.

No jealousy. No resentment that he might eventually surpass her. No calculation about how this affected her own position.

She was just... happy for him.

Vox felt something twist in his chest. Not guilt. More like confusion. Dissonance.

"Thank you," he finally said. "For advocating for me. You didn't have to do that."

"Of course I did!" Margaret squeezed his arms, her grip surprisingly strong. "You deserve it, Vincent. You work so hard. You're so talented."

She paused, her expression shifting into something softer. More vulnerable. "And you're..." She searched for the word. "You're special."

The word hung between them for a second.

"I have to get back to work." Margaret said suddenly, taking a small step back. "But we should celebrate! Maybe dinner tomorrow night? Like you promised? Somewhere nice?"

Tomorrow. Friday. The night after his meeting with Alastor.

"That sounds perfect," Vox lied, the words coming automatically now.

"Wonderful!" She squeezed his arms one more time, then seemed to remember they were in a public hallway. "I'll let you get back to your desk. We can talk details later."

She walked away, practically bouncing, her heels clicking a cheerful rhythm.

Vox stood in the hallway, staring at nothing.

A promotion. A raise. Official recognition. Everything he'd wanted from this whole sordid situation.

And he'd gotten it without killing anyone.

He walked back to his desk slowly, his mind spinning.

Around him, the newsroom continued its chaos. Phones rang. Someone was arguing about sports near the water cooler. The clatter of typewriters was steady as rain. No one had noticed the small shift that had just occurred in Sterling's office. No one knew that Vincent Whittman had just been promoted.

Vox sat down at his desk. Pulled out the weather reports. Stared at them without seeing anything.

His hands were shaking slightly. He pressed them flat against the desk, willing them to stop.

The plan had been simple. Elegant, even. Remove the obstacle. Take her position. Advance by force.

But the plan had failed spectacularly. He'd collapsed in an alley, paralyzed by divine intervention, while Margaret ran away unharmed. He'd twitched in the filth like a dying animal, unable to complete the one task that would have solved all his problems.

And now, twelve hours later, he had what he'd wanted anyway.

The universe had rewarded his failure.

This was the universe looking at his situation and saying "yes, actually, you were right to want this, here you go, have it without the murder."

He'd been thinking too small. Getting his hands dirty. Playing in the mud like some common thug when he should have been operating at a higher level. The humiliation in the alley hadn't been punishment. It had been correction. A course adjustment.

Like a parent grabbing a child's hand before they touched a hot stove.

Don't do it that way. Do it this way.

The universe didn't want him to be a killer. It wanted him to be a puppet master. Someone who moved pieces on the board without ever touching them directly.

And hadn't that always been his strength? In Hell, he'd built an empire not through violence but through control. Through media. Through manipulation. The people didn't even realize they were being manipulated until it was far too late to do anything about it.

This was just a return to form. A reminder of what he was actually good at.

Margaret was fighting for him. Advocating for him. Making him look good to Sterling. She had connections he didn't have yet. She was a shield and a sword and she was offering both to him freely.

Why would he destroy that?

Sterling had maybe a year left in him. Two if he was lucky. The man was a heart attack waiting to happen, and when it did, someone would need to step up.

That someone would be Vox.

The universe owed him. He'd always known that, deep in his core. Had felt it in Hell, that burning certainty that he deserved more than what he'd been given. That he'd been cheated somehow, by fate or God or whoever was running this cosmic circus.

And now the universe was finally starting to pay up.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The radio station's building looked different at night.

During the day, it was just another brick facade on a commercial street, unremarkable among the pharmacies and hardware stores. But after dark, with most of the windows black except for the second floor where a warm glow spilled out, it looked almost theatrical. Like a stage set waiting for the actors to arrive.

Vox stood across the street for a moment, adjusting his tie for the third time. His palms were sweating despite the cold. He'd changed clothes twice before leaving his apartment, settling finally on his better suit, the one he saved for important occasions. He'd even polished his shoes, spending twenty minutes working the brush in careful circles until the leather gleamed.

This was it. The meeting. The moment everything changed.

Or the moment everything fell apart. Hard to say which until he was actually in the room.

He crossed the street, his shoes clicking on the wet pavement. The fog from the last few nights had lifted but the air still held that damp, heavy quality that made the city feel closer, more claustrophobic. He pushed through the heavy door, which protested with a groan that echoed in the small entryway, and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Each step creaked under his weight. The stairwell smelled like old wood and dust and something vaguely industrial. The walls were painted green, the kind of color that was meant to be calming but just ended up being depressing.

The hallway on the second floor was narrower than he'd expected. Functional. The walls were painted that same dull green, though here it was peeling in places, revealing older layers of paint underneath. Cream. Then blue. Then something that might have been pink but had faded to a sickly salmon color.

The air was thick with the smell of hot vacuum tubes and old paper, overlaid with something else. Coffee, definitely. Strong coffee that had been sitting on a burner too long. And beneath that, burnt dust. The particular smell of electrical equipment running hot.

A woman sat at a switchboard halfway down the hall, her back to him. She was plugging and unplugging cables with practiced efficiency, each movement precise and economical. The board in front of her was a maze of holes and wires, easily a hundred connections, maybe more. She navigated it like a pianist playing a complicated piece from memory, her hands moving without hesitation.

She wore a dark blue dress with a white collar, practical and professional. Her hair was pinned up in a style that had probably been fashionable five years ago and was now just efficient. She had a pencil stuck behind one ear.

Vox cleared his throat.

She didn't turn around. Her hands kept moving. Pull, plug, flip. Pull, plug, flip.

"Excuse me," he tried again, louder this time. His voice echoed slightly in the narrow hallway. "I have an appointment with Alastor?"

The woman pulled a cable, plugged it into a different hole, flipped a switch. Her shoulders didn't shift. Her posture didn't change. "Wait there," she said without looking at him. Her voice was flat, professional, completely uninterested. She gestured vaguely to her left where a wooden chair sat against the wall.

Not "please have a seat." Not "he'll be with you shortly." Just "wait there," delivered with the enthusiasm of someone directing traffic.

"Thank you," Vox said to the back of her head.

No response. She was already handling another call, a light on her board flashing insistently.

Vox walked to the chair and sat. It was as uncomfortable as it looked. Hard wood with no cushion and a backrest that hit him at exactly the wrong angle, too low for his shoulders and too high for his lower back. The kind of chair that was designed for function rather than comfort, or possibly designed specifically to make visitors uncomfortable.

He shifted, trying to find a position that didn't make his spine protest. Failed. Settled for leaning slightly forward, elbows on his knees, then decided that looked too casual and sat back again.

From behind a closed door at the end of the hall, maybe twenty feet away, he heard voices. Two of them, talking rapidly. The words were muffled by the heavy wood but the rhythm was clear. Back and forth, quick exchanges punctuated by occasional laughter.

Vox leaned forward slightly, straining to make out what they were saying. The door was solid, old. Pre-war construction, the kind that actually blocked sound instead of the thin hollow core garbage they used in newer buildings.

The voices rose and fell in a pattern he couldn't quite track. It wasn't English. Or at least, it didn't sound like English. The cadence was wrong, the vowels too round, the consonants softer. There was a musicality to it that English didn't have.

One voice was definitely Alastor's. He could pick out that particular pitch, that theatrical quality even when he couldn't understand the words. The other voice was deeper, rougher. An older man, maybe. Someone comfortable enough with Alastor to interrupt him, to laugh at his jokes.

Vox glanced at the switchboard woman. She was still focused on her work, fingers moving constantly across the board. Pulling and plugging and switching with mechanical precision.

She'd probably heard a thousand conversations through that door. Probably didn't even register them anymore.

"Sounds intense in there," Vox said, aiming for casual and charming. "Are they casting spells or what?"

The woman didn't look up. Didn't pause in her work. "I'm pretty sure it's French, sir."

The 'sir' was perfunctory. Automatic. The verbal equivalent of nodding without looking up. She might as well have been talking to the coat rack.

Vox tried again, refusing to be dismissed so easily. "Busy night?"

"Mm-hmm." She pulled another cable, the movement smooth and practiced.

"Do you know how long he'll be?"

"No, sir." Pull. Plug. Flip.

A light on her board started flashing, red and insistent. She responded immediately, plugging in a cable with one hand while flipping a switch with the other. "Station WQRX, how may I direct your call?"

Her voice transformed completely. Suddenly it was warmer, more engaging, pleasant and helpful. Like someone had flipped a switch in her personality along with the one on her board.

"One moment please." She made the connection, waited three seconds, then unplugged and moved on to the next flashing light. Never once looking at Vox.

He gave up and settled back in the chair, resigned to being ignored.

The clock on the wall ticked with aggressive loudness. Each second was a small assault on his patience, the sound bouncing off the narrow walls and amplifying. He watched the minute hand crawl forward with glacial slowness. Five minutes. Ten.

Behind the door, the conversation continued. Another burst of laughter, this one louder, more genuine. Someone said something that made the other person respond with what sounded like mock outrage, the tone rising in pitch. More laughter followed, warm and easy.

Vox's jaw tightened. This was deliberate. Had to be. Alastor was making him wait. Establishing dominance through the simple expedient of wasting his time, making him sit in an uncomfortable chair in a hallway while having a delightful conversation with someone else.

Or maybe not. Maybe Alastor had genuinely forgotten about the appointment. Maybe the meeting behind that door was important, running long, and Vox was simply an afterthought. A minor item on a busy schedule, the kind of thing you remembered halfway through something more interesting and thought "oh right, I should probably deal with that eventually."

That thought was somehow worse than the deliberate power play. At least being deliberately dismissed meant he registered as significant enough to dismiss.

Fifteen minutes. Twenty.

The hallway was warm. Too warm. The radiator in the corner hissed and clanked, the air feeling thick and slightly stale. Vox loosened his tie slightly, just enough to ease the pressure on his throat. The collar of his shirt was starting to feel damp with sweat.

He checked his watch. Nine thirty-five. He'd arrived at nine fifteen exactly. Twenty minutes of sitting in this hallway, listening to muffled French conversation and the relentless ticking of the clock.

The switchboard woman plugged and unplugged cables. The radiator hissed. The clock ticked. Behind the door, the voices continued their easy rhythm, occasionally spiking into laughter.

The monotony was hypnotic.

Vox's head was starting to feel heavy. The warmth, the rhythmic ticking, the monotonous sound of cables being plugged and unplugged. It was all conspiring against him, weighing down his eyelids and making his thoughts sluggish.

His eyes drifted shut for just a moment. Just to rest them. Not sleeping. Just resting.

Then opened again. He sat up straighter, forcing himself alert. Blinked hard several times. Focused on the clock, counting the seconds. One. Two. Three.

But the heaviness returned almost immediately. His eyelids felt weighted, like someone had attached small stones to them. The back of the chair, uncomfortable as it was, provided just enough support.

He'd barely slept last night. Three hours, maybe. Most of it spent staring at the ceiling, replaying the disaster in the alley, feeling phantom echoes of that white-hot pain. His body was running on fumes at this point.

Just for a second. Just to rest his eyes.

The thoughts came in that fuzzy space between waking and sleeping, the place where the brain's filters stopped working properly and everything that had been carefully locked away started seeping out.

Where am I really?

The question surfaced unbidden, unwanted. He'd been avoiding it for weeks now, shoving it down whenever it tried to emerge. But here, in this quiet hallway with his guard finally dropping, it pushed through with the inevitability of water finding a crack.

Was Hell still running? Were Valentino and Velvette sitting in their usual spots at the meeting table right now, wondering where he'd gone? Was there an empty chair where he should be sitting? Or had time stopped there entirely, frozen at the moment he'd been yanked away, everything paused like a film reel jammed in a projector?

Maybe this was a branch. A separate timeline. Maybe there were two Voxes now, one still in Hell doing whatever Vox in Hell did, attending meetings and managing territories and dealing with the endless parade of problems that came with running a media empire. And one here, in this primitive decade, trying to rebuild from scratch with nothing but his memories and ambition.

The physics of it made his head hurt. Or maybe that was just the exhaustion.

Or maybe Hell was continuing without him. Days passing. Weeks. Months. His territory being divided up by rivals who saw an opportunity in his absence. His screens going dark one by one as maintenance went undone. His empire crumbling because the architect wasn't there to maintain it, to make the thousand small decisions that kept everything running smoothly.

Did they tell Valentino and Velvette?

The thought hit harder than he expected, settling in his chest with uncomfortable weight. He could picture them perfectly. Valentino sprawled across the couch in the penthouse, smoke curling from his cigarette, asking "Where the fuck is Vox?" in that irritated way he had when someone disrupted his routine. Not worried. Just annoyed. Inconvenienced.

Velvette would be on her phone, not looking up but clearly impatient that their third wasn't there for their morning meeting. "He's probably busy with some new project," she'd say, dismissive. "Give him five minutes."

But five minutes would turn into an hour. Then a day. Then a week.

Would they worry then? Would they actually look for him? Send out people to check his usual haunts, ask questions, turn over stones?

Or would they just shrug and move on, filling the power vacuum he'd left behind with the ruthless efficiency they applied to everything else? Split his territory between them. Absorb his assets. Maybe even redecorate the entire tower.

The thought stung more than it should have.

It would be so much better with them here.

The admission startled him even in his half-asleep state. He didn't want to need them. Didn't want to be the kind of person who required backup, who couldn't operate alone. He'd built his original empire solo, hadn't he? Clawed his way up from nothing with just his intelligence and his ambition and his willingness to do whatever it took.

He could do it again. He was doing it again.

But the loneliness was real. Sharp. A physical ache in his chest that had nothing to do with fatigue or stress or the uncomfortable chair or any of the other things he could rationalize away.

He missed them. His partners. His team. His friends. They might not have made this easier, but it would definitely feel less lonely. Less uncertain, if he was being honest with himself, which he tried very hard not to be.

Because the truth was that he had no idea what he was doing. He was improvising. Making it up as he went. Hoping his memories of the future were accurate enough to guide him, hoping the rules of this timeline matched the ones he remembered, hoping he didn't make some catastrophic mistake that got him killed before he even got started.

In Hell, he'd had infrastructure. Resources. People who owed him favors. Information networks. The combined weight of decades of carefully built power.

Here, he had nothing. He was starting from zero. Less than zero, actually, because Vincent Whittman had somehow managed to accumulate negative social capital before Vox even arrived.

He shoved the feeling down, or tried to. Weakness. All of it was weakness. He didn't need the Vees. He didn't need anyone. He was Vox. He'd built empires from nothing before and he'd do it again.

But the loneliness lingered anyway, a dull throb of homesickness for a place that was literally Hell.

His head tilted further against the wall. The angle was wrong, putting a crick in his neck that he'd regret later, but he was too tired to care. The clock kept ticking its relentless rhythm. The radiator kept hissing. The switchboard woman kept working, her cables clicking softly as they connected and disconnected, a sound that was almost musical in its consistency.

Vox's breathing slowed. Deepened. His shoulders relaxed against the hard wood of the chair. The voices behind the door were still talking, but they'd become part of the ambient noise now, just another layer in the white noise of the building.

The exhaustion crashed over him like a wave, sudden and complete. He fought it for maybe thirty seconds, trying to force his eyes to stay open, his spine to stay straight.

Then gave up.

His head lolled to the side. His jaw went slack. His hands, which had been gripping his knees, relaxed and fell to his sides.

He was asleep before he fully realized it was happening.

He didn't snore, at least. That was something. But his breathing took on that particular rhythm of deep sleep, the kind where dreams start to creep in at the edges.

The switchboard woman glanced over once. Took in the sleeping figure slumped in the chair. Looked back at her board without comment and kept working.

This clearly wasn't the first time someone had fallen asleep in that chair.

KNOCK. KNOCK.

The sound was sharp, immediate, impossibly loud. Right next to his ear. So close the vibration seemed to travel through the wood and into his skull.

Vox jerked awake with a gasp. His head snapped up so fast his neck protested with a sharp crack that he felt all the way down his spine. For a moment, he had no idea where he was. The hallway swam in his vision, the green walls and buzzing fluorescent lights completely foreign.

Alastor stood over him, one hand raised, having just rapped his knuckles against the wooden armrest of the chair. Two sharp strikes that had probably been audible throughout the entire hallway.

He was smiling that wide, unreadable smile. His suit was immaculate, not a thread out of place. The fabric looked expensive, well-tailored, fitting his frame perfectly. He looked like he'd just stepped out of a magazine advertisement for expensive menswear.

He looked, in short, like someone who had never been tired or uncertain or uncomfortable in his entire life.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Vincent." His voice was cheerful, bright, completely at odds with the lateness of the hour and the fluorescent dinginess of the hallway. "I do hope your dreams were pleasant."

Vox scrambled to gather his thoughts. His right foot had fallen asleep at some point and now tingled with pins and needles. "I wasn't... I was just resting my eyes."

"Of course." Alastor's head tilted slightly, like a bird examining something interesting on the ground. "How silly of me to assume otherwise."

He was still smiling. Always smiling. It was impossible to tell if he was amused or annoyed or completely indifferent. The smile gave nothing away.

His gaze fixed on Vox's face. Not his eyes, which would have been normal for conversation. His cheek. The left one. His focus narrowed with the precision of a microscope adjusting to higher magnification.

Alastor leaned in closer, his eyes narrowing. "My, my. Your face appears asymmetrical this evening."

Vox's hand went to his cheek automatically, his fingers pressing against the skin. It was still tender from the fall, a dull ache that he'd mostly ignored all day. The swelling had gone down. He'd checked multiple times in the mirror. There was nothing visible.

"What?"

"Is your left cheek swollen?" Alastor's tone was curious, clinical. He tilted his head the other direction, examining from a different angle like he was triangulating. His smile never wavered but his eyes were sharp, analytical. Dissecting.

Panic fluttered in Vox's chest, cold and immediate. *How could he possibly see that?* It wasn't visible. He'd checked. Multiple times. Once in his apartment bathroom under the harsh light

of the single bulb. Once in the men's room at work under fluorescent tubes that showed every flaw. Once in the reflection of a store window on his walk over.

There was no bruising. No obvious swelling. The skin color was normal. He'd been on camera for the evening weather broadcast and nobody had said a word. Not the makeup woman who'd dusted powder on his face. Not the cameraman who'd spent five minutes adjusting the lighting. Not Sterling, who would have definitely mentioned it if there was anything wrong with his on-air talent's appearance.

"I..." Vox's brain raced, trying to find an explanation that wouldn't lead to more questions. "I got into a fight."

The lie tumbled out before he could think of something better. It was instinctive. The kind of thing that explained facial injuries without making you look weak.

"A fight." Alastor's smile widened, showing teeth. The expression was delighted, like Vox had just told him the most entertaining joke he'd heard all week. He leaned in even closer, his face now inches from Vox's,

"Really?" Alastor said, but it wasn't much of a question. "With whom?"

Vox pressed back against the chair, trying to create distance, but there was nowhere to go. The wall was directly behind him. Alastor had him pinned without touching him, using nothing but proximity and that unblinking stare.

"Tell me, Vincent," Alastor continued, his voice quieter now. The hallway seemed to contract around them, the world narrowing to just this moment. Just this examination. "Are you a good fighter?"

"The best," Vox said, puffing up his chest despite the awkward angle and the fact that he was still half-pinned against the chair. His voice came out more defensive than confident, higher pitched than he'd intended. Not convincing. Not even close.

Alastor let out a short, sharp laugh.

The sound was bright and genuine and completely mocking. It echoed in the narrow hallway, bouncing off the peeling paint and the water-stained ceiling tiles. Even the switchboard woman's fingers paused for a fraction of a second, though she didn't turn around.

"Could have fooled me."

The words hung in the air for a moment, each syllable landing like a small slap. Then Alastor straightened abruptly, the examination over. The intensity vanished as if someone had flipped a switch. He turned on his heel with military precision and started walking down the hallway toward the door at the end, his footsteps sharp and purposeful.

"Come along," he called over his shoulder without looking back. His voice was back to that cheerful, professional tone. "Let's not waste any more of our valuable time. We have business to discuss."

Vox stood there for a moment, his cheek burning now not from the injury but from humiliation. His face felt hot. His hands were clenched into fists at his sides, nails digging into his palms hard enough to hurt.

The switchboard woman was still working, still hadn't looked up once during the entire exchange. If she'd witnessed his complete and total dismantling, she gave no sign of it. Her fingers kept moving across the board with the same mechanical precision.

Vox unclenched his fists. Smoothed down his shirt, which had gotten wrinkled while he slept. Adjusted his tie, which had gone crooked at some point. Ran a hand through his hair, trying to flatten down the part that was sticking up.

Took a breath. Held it. Let it out slowly.

The Vincent mask slammed back into place. Eager. Helpful. Maybe a little nervous but excited for the opportunity. Not humiliated. Definitely not humiliated.

He squared his shoulders and followed Alastor down the hallway.

The door at the end stood open now, spilling warm light into the corridor. Golden and inviting, completely at odds with the fluorescent harshness of the hallway. Beyond it, Vox could see the edge of a desk, mahogany and well-maintained. The corner of what looked like a filing cabinet. And the glow of vacuum tubes from equipment he couldn't quite see, casting strange shadows on the walls.

Alastor had already disappeared inside. No waiting. No holding the door. No polite gesture to usher his guest in first.

Vox reached the threshold and paused for just a moment. This was it. The moment where everything either moved forward or collapsed completely. Where he either convinced Alastor he was useful or revealed himself as a fraud.

No pressure.

He took one more breath.

Then stepped through the door.

The game, apparently, had already begun.

And judging by the last five minutes, he was already losing.

Chapter End Notes

I left the draft I had prepared for this chapter at work. But instead of waiting for Monday to come, I rewrote it in full! Awaiting 1000 word essays from each and every one of you about how awesome and cool I am. Chop chop!

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The office was exactly what Vox expected.

He stepped into something that looked like it had been arranged by an obsessive librarian with unlimited funding.

The room was larger than the hallway had suggested, stretching back a good twenty feet. The walls were lined with shelves, and every shelf was filled with records. Hundreds of them, maybe thousands, organized with the precision of a card catalog. Alphabetical by artist, then by album title, the spines all facing out at exactly the same angle.

The desk was mahogany, real mahogany, not the cheap veneer most offices used. It sat near the far wall, positioned so whoever sat behind it would have their back to the window and face the door. A power position. The surface was clear except for a small lamp with a green glass shade, a leather-bound appointment book, and a fountain pen resting in its holder at a perfect diagonal.

To the left, a small bar cart held crystal glasses that caught the light and threw small rainbows across the wall. The bottles were arranged by height, labels facing forward. Beside the cart, a filing cabinet stood with all its drawers labeled in neat handwriting.

The broadcast equipment occupied the right side of the room. A proper setup, professional grade. The microphone hung from a boom arm that could be adjusted for height and angle. Behind it, a rack of vacuum tubes glowed warm and amber, their filaments visible through the glass. The mixing board was spotless, every knob and slider at its neutral position, every cable bundled and secured with small clips.

Even the air felt organized. It smelled like furniture polish and old paper and something else. Something clean and sharp that might have been cologne or might have been the peculiar scent of well-maintained electronics.

Vox stood just inside the doorway and felt immediately, viscerally out of place.

His suit was wrinkled from sleeping in the chair. His tie was still crooked despite his attempt to fix it. His shoes, polished though they were, looked cheap next to the Persian rug that covered the center of the floor. He probably still had pillow creases on his face.

He looked like what he was: a man pretending to belong somewhere he absolutely did not.

Alastor moved through the space with easy familiarity, not looking back to see if Vox was following. He walked to the bar cart with purposeful strides, his shoes making no sound on the rug.

"Drink, Vincent?" The question was casual, thrown over his shoulder.

Vox opened his mouth to respond.

Alastor was already pouring. Two glasses. Something dark amber that caught the light as it splashed into the crystal. Whiskey, probably. Good whiskey, judging by the bottle's shape and the lack of a garish label.

The message was clear. This was Alastor's space. Alastor's rules. Alastor decided who drank and when and how much.

Vox closed his mouth and waited.

The sound of liquid hitting glass was the only noise in the room for several seconds. Splash. Pause. Splash. Alastor was precise even in this, measuring out exactly equal amounts into each glass.

Vox's mind raced, trying to recalibrate. The humiliation in the hallway was still fresh. He needed to recover. Needed to find solid ground. Needed to prove he wasn't just some pathetic weatherman who fell asleep in waiting rooms.

He needed to establish himself as someone worth Alastor's time.

Someone on his level.

The idea arrived fully formed, seductive in its simplicity. Shared disdain. That's how men like them bonded, wasn't it? Through mutual contempt for someone beneath them both. It was the foundation of every boys' club, every back room deal, every alliance between powerful people.

Find a target. Make it clear you both recognize the target as inferior. Bond over that recognition.

"God," Vox said, injecting casual disdain into his voice. He even added a small laugh, the kind made when sharing observations about people who didn't matter. "That woman at the desk. She's a real piece of work, isn't she?"

Alastor stopped pouring. The silence was immediate and absolute.

The only sound was the faint hiss of the vacuum tubes and his own heartbeat, suddenly very loud in his ears.

Alastor's head turned. Slowly. Just enough to look at Vox out of the corner of his eye. Not a full turn. Just that slight shift that somehow felt more threatening than if he'd spun around completely.

His expression hadn't changed. The smile was still there, fixed and unchanging.

"You think so?" His tone sounded amused.

Vox's brain screamed at him to stop. To backtrack. To say "never mind" and change the subject and move on to literally anything else.

But he'd committed. And retreating now would look weak. Nervous. Like he didn't stand behind his own observations.

Besides, Alastor was probably just being polite. Playing devil's advocate. The pause was just surprise, not disagreement. Vox could clarify. Could make it funny. Could turn this into the bonding moment he'd intended.

He laughed again, louder this time. More confident. "Yeah! So dry. No personality whatsoever. Zero warmth. I tried making conversation and she acted like I was furniture. I bet she's a real joy at parties."

The words tumbled out, each one digging the hole deeper. He was trying to sound casual, conspiratorial, like two men sharing an obvious truth about the hired help.

Instead, he sounded mean. Petty. Like someone punching down at a woman who'd done nothing except her job.

Alastor turned his head back to the glasses. Finished pouring the second one with the same precise measurement as the first. Set the bottle down on the cart with a soft clink of glass on wood.

"I find her quite personable." His tone was conversational. "And efficient."

He picked up both glasses, holding them by their bases with practiced ease. Then he turned around to face Vox fully, the smile never wavering.

"And she doesn't meddle."

The word landed like a slap.

Meddle.

Not gossip. Not chatter. Meddle. The implication was clear and cutting. Vox wasn't making conversation or building rapport. He was sticking his nose where it didn't belong. Talking about people he had no business discussing. Being the kind of person who showed up to someone's office and immediately started shit-talking the staff.

The kind of person who couldn't be trusted.

Vox felt his face heat. The flush started at his neck and spread upward, burning. He wanted to defend himself, to explain that wasn't what he meant, that he was just trying to make conversation, that he'd misjudged the situation.

But there was nothing to say.

Alastor crossed the room with those same purposeful strides, holding both glasses. He extended one toward Vox, his smile pleasant and professional and completely devoid of warmth.

"Your drink."

Vox took it. The crystal was heavy in his hand, the liquid inside inviting. He resisted the urge to down it in one gulp.

Alastor walked past him, moving behind the mahogany desk. He didn't sit immediately. Instead, he stood there for a moment, surveying his domain, then lowered himself into the chair with the deliberate grace of someone settling into a throne.

The casual warmth from their encounter in the breakroom was gone. The playful mockery from the hallway had vanished. This was business now. Pure and simple.

Alastor set his glass down on the desk, precisely in the center of a small coaster that Vox hadn't noticed before. He steepled his fingers, elbows resting on the armrests of his chair, and fixed Vox with that unreadable stare.

"You spoke of remote transmission." His voice was crisp, professional. "Explain."

This was it. The audition. The moment where Vox either proved himself useful or got shown the door.

He took a breath. Let the Vincent mask slip away. Let the nervous weatherman recede into the background.

The CEO stepped forward.

Vox's entire demeanor shifted. His shoulders straightened. His spine lengthened. The nervousness that had been plaguing him since the hallway evaporated, replaced by something sharper. More confident. More real.

This was his territory. His expertise. This was what he was actually good at.

He leaned forward slightly, not enough to seem aggressive but enough to project engagement. Energy. His free hand came up, gesturing as he spoke, using movement to punctuate his points.

"What's a remote broadcast right now, Alastor?" He didn't wait for an answer. "It's a production. A clumsy one. You want to broadcast from a jazz club? From a political rally? From anywhere that isn't this room?"

He gestured around them, encompassing the studio.

"You have to book a dedicated phone line from the telephone company weeks in advance. And they charge you through the nose for it. Premium rates. Then you need a team of engineers. At least three, maybe four, depending on the venue. They have to run heavy copper cable from a truck parked outside, sometimes hundreds of feet if the venue's internal wiring isn't up to spec. It takes hours to set up. *Hours*."

He took a sip of his drink, using the pause for effect.

"And for what? For a signal that sounds like you're talking through a tin can. You lose all the warmth. The intimacy. The bass response vanishes completely. The dynamic range is crushed down to nothing. Every listener, everyone with ears, they know you're not in the studio. The magic," he chose the word deliberately, watching Alastor's reaction, "is broken."

Alastor's expression hadn't changed, but Vox could feel the attention. The focus. He was listening. Really listening.

Vox pressed forward, warming to his subject.

"And here's the real problem. The infrastructure. Right now, if you want quality, you're completely dependent on telephone company infrastructure. Their lines. Their equipment. Their schedule. You're a captive market paying whatever they decide to charge."

He gestured with the glass, the amber liquid catching the light.

"They know you need them. They know you have no alternatives. So they squeeze. Every. Time."

He set the glass down on the edge of the desk, leaning in further.

"What I'm talking about is different. This isn't a telephone call. It's a mirror. A portable system so seamless, so high-fidelity, that you could be broadcasting from the back of a moving car and your audience would swear you were sitting right here, in this chair."

He tapped the desk for emphasis.

"No quality loss. No latency. No degradation. A perfect, invisible tether from anywhere in the city, straight to your transmitter, straight to the airwaves. Your listeners wouldn't hear the difference. They couldn't hear the difference."

He picked up his glass again, took another sip. The whiskey was smooth, expensive. The kind of thing that cost more than Vincent's weekly salary.

"And more than that," he continued, his voice dropping slightly, becoming more conspiratorial. "Independence. No more begging the phone company for line time. No more union engineers charging overtime. No more being locked into this room for every single broadcast. You want to cover a boxing match? Go. You want to do a live interview at a restaurant? Go. You want to broadcast from a hotel ballroom or a political convention or someone's living room?"

He spread his hands, the gesture encompassing infinite possibility.

"Go. Anywhere. Anytime. And nobody listening would ever know you'd moved."

The silence that followed was heavy. Vox let it stretch, let the vision sink in. He could see the wheels turning behind Alastor's eyes, could practically watch him considering the implications.

Then Alastor leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking softly. His fingers remained steepled. His expression remained neutral.

"An ambitious vision," he said carefully. "However, I'm curious about the practical implementation. How exactly does one achieve this... invisible tether, as you put it, with current technology? The telephone system exists because radio transmission quality degrades rapidly over distance. Particularly in urban environments with all the interference. Steel buildings. Electrical systems. The obstacles are significant."

Vox had been waiting for this. The technical challenge. The "prove it's not just fantasy" question.

He waved a hand dismissively, the gesture borrowed from every executive he'd ever seen deflect inconvenient details.

"The specifics? The vacuum tube configurations, the power supply stabilization, the antenna design? That's what engineers are for." He said it like it was obvious. Like only an idiot would worry about such minutiae. "We hire the best minds from RCA, maybe poach a few from Bell Labs if we need to. Give them a proper budget, not some shoestring operation. Give them time and resources and clear specifications. And we tell them to build it."

He picked up his glass again, swirled the liquid inside.

"My job isn't to solder the wires, Alastor. My job isn't to calculate resonant frequencies or design circuit boards. My job is to have the vision. To see what's possible before anyone else does. To understand what the market needs before the market knows it needs it."

He took a long drink, nearly finishing the glass.

"And I'm telling you, with the right resources, it is possible. The technology will exist. The physics work. It's just a matter of engineering. Of putting the pieces together in the right configuration. That's a solved problem. You just need someone with the vision to see it and the capital to make it happen."

He set the empty glass down with a soft clink.

The pitch was done. He'd laid it all out. The problem, the solution, the vision, the pathway forward. He'd painted a picture of freedom and power and independence, wrapped in technical credibility and executive confidence.

He'd done his part. Now it was Alastor's move.

Vox sat back slightly, feeling the adrenaline of the performance start to ebb. His shoulders relaxed. His breathing steadied. The CEO mask had served its purpose.

He glanced down at the desk, at his empty glass sitting there.

Then his eyes tracked to Alastor's glass.

Still full. Completely untouched.

The liquid sat there, undisturbed, the same level as when Alastor had poured it. Not even a sip. Not even a pretense of drinking.

The confidence from his pitch evaporated immediately.

He hadn't been participating in a conversation. He'd been giving a performance. And Alastor had been watching. Evaluating. Not as a potential partner. As someone interviewing a contractor.

The power dynamic snapped back into focus with uncomfortable clarity. This wasn't a meeting of equals. This was Alastor deciding whether Vox was useful.

And useful things were tools. Tools got used and discarded when the job was done.

Alastor leaned forward, his elbows returning to the desk. His fingers remained steepled, his posture the picture of professional consideration.

"A compelling vision, Vincent." His tone had shifted. Still pleasant, but with an edge underneath. Serious now. "However."

He paused, letting the word hang.

"For such an advantage to be truly effective, it must remain an advantage. My advantage." He emphasized the possessive. "There is one non-negotiable condition to any arrangement we might make. Absolute discretion."

His smile widened, showing more teeth. It was a predator's smile, sharp and calculated.

"The other networks would kill for this kind of technology." He said it like a joke, but the humor didn't reach his eyes. "If they even suspected what we were building, they would steal it, replicate it, throw money at their engineers until our advantage was gone. This industry is cutthroat, Vincent. You understand that, I'm sure."

He leaned back again, the chair creaking softly.

"I want a leg up on the competition. A definitive one. And that requires silence. No bragging to colleagues. No papers published in technical journals. No casual mentions at industry events. Complete, total discretion. Do you understand?"

Vox looked at Alastor. Really looked at him. Past the smile, past the pleasant professional demeanor, past the carefully constructed performance.

He understood perfectly.

You don't care about the competition, his internal monologue supplied with crystal clarity. *You care about your alibi.*

The pieces clicked into place with satisfying precision. If everyone knew Alastor could broadcast from anywhere, then "I was on the radio" stopped being proof he was in the studio. The perfect alibi became worthless the moment it became public knowledge.

But if it was secret? If only Alastor and his engineer knew? Then he could be anywhere. Could do anything. Could kill someone in an alley while his voice played over the airwaves, and nobody would ever suspect because everybody knew radio hosts broadcast from studios.

You want to be able to kill and talk at the same time.

The realization should have been horrifying. Should have sent Vox running for the door.

Instead, he felt a surge of power. Of control. He knew Alastor's real secret now. Knew what this was actually for. And that knowledge was leverage. Was ammunition.

Was exactly what he needed.

Vox leaned forward, his expression shifting into something serious. Trustworthy. The face of a man who understood the gravity of secrets.

"Of course," he said, his voice low and earnest. "I understand completely. Full discretion. Nobody will hear a word from me. This stays between us."

He held Alastor's gaze, letting sincerity radiate from every pore.

"Our secret weapon."

Alastor studied him for a long moment, that unreadable stare searching for cracks in the facade. For dishonesty. For weakness.

Then he smiled, and this time it looked almost genuine.

"Excellent." He stood, the movement fluid and final. The interview was over. "Then I believe we have an arrangement."

Vox stood as well, hope flaring bright in his chest. An arrangement. A partnership. A way in. This was it. This was the moment everything changed.

"You will find the engineers," Alastor continued, walking around the desk toward the door. "You will oversee the project. You will deliver me this vision you've described."

He reached the door, his hand going to the knob. Then he paused, looking back over his shoulder at Vox. The smile was still there, pleasant and professional and utterly final.

"It will be a simple, transactional affair, of course. You provide the technology, I provide handsome compensation for your time and expertise. And once the work is complete, we can go our separate ways. No complications. No entanglements. Clean and professional."

The door opened. The hallway's fluorescent light spilled in, harsh and clinical after the warm ambiance of the office.

"I'll be in touch with the initial specifications and budget parameters early next week. Do have a pleasant evening, Vincent."

It wasn't a suggestion. It was a dismissal.

Vox walked to the door, his feet moving automatically. He stepped into the hallway. The door clicked shut behind him with a soft, final sound.

He stood there for a moment, staring at the closed door.

The triumph that had been building during his pitch was gone. Replaced by something cold and sharp and furious.

Separate ways.

The words echoed in his head, each repetition adding weight.

Separate ways.

Like he was a contractor. A hired gun. Someone you brought in for a specific job and then sent on their way once the work was done. Someone useful but ultimately disposable.

That wasn't the plan. That wasn't what he wanted. He didn't want compensation. He didn't want a transaction. He wanted *in*. Wanted a piece of the power. Wanted to be part of something instead of just a tool used by someone else.

The switchboard operator was still at her post, still plugging and unplugging cables. She didn't look up as he stood there.

Vox walked back down the hallway slowly, his shoes clicking on the linoleum. The uncomfortable wooden chair sat empty against the wall, a monument to the time he'd wasted waiting.

He reached the stairs and started down, his hand gripping the railing harder than necessary.

His mind replayed the evening. The humiliation in the hallway. The failed attempt to bond. The successful pitch undermined by the realization that he'd never been a potential partner.

Just a potential employee.

And that full glass. That untouched, mocking glass of whiskey sitting on Alastor's desk.

He'd drunk. Alastor hadn't. The host serves, the guest consumes. The host remains in control while the guest relaxes. It was a power play so obvious he should have seen it coming.

But he'd been too busy performing. Too caught up in his pitch. Too focused on proving himself useful.

He pushed through the heavy door at the bottom of the stairs and stepped out into the night air. It was colder now, the fog thicker. The streetlamps created halos of diffused light that barely penetrated the gloom.

Vox stood on the sidewalk, hands shoved in his pockets, staring at nothing.

Separate ways.

He laughed. The sound was bitter, harsh, completely devoid of humor.

"Oh, we're not going our separate ways, Alastor," he said to the empty street. His breath misted in the cold air, the words hanging visible for a moment before dissipating. "We're just getting started."

He turned and started walking west, toward his apartment. Toward the wall covered in newspaper clippings and the guppy swimming its endless circle and the bottle of cheap whiskey he'd drink until the fury dulled enough to think clearly.

Behind him, the radio station's second-floor window glowed warm and inviting.

Vox didn't look back.

He had work to do.

Chapter End Notes

No more anon. Oh also since the discord idea from last chapters comments got so much attention I'll probably do it sometime... soon? Hopefully!

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The desk they'd given him was in the worst possible corner of the newsroom.

Not given, exactly. More like surrendered. It was a spare desk that nobody wanted, shoved against the wall near the supply closet where the noise from every direction converged into an auditory assault. To his left, three typists hammered away at their machines with the rhythm of machine gun fire. To his right, the sports department was having a loud argument about batting averages. Behind him, someone was running copies on a mimeograph machine that screeched like a dying animal every third rotation.

And directly in front of him sat the telephone.

Black. Heavy. Rotary dial that clicked with each number. The receiver smelled like cheap aftershave.

Vox picked it up, checked the handset for lipstick stains, found none, and started dialing.

It was Friday morning. Less than twelve hours since his meeting with Alastor. Less than twelve hours since that dismissal disguised as an arrangement. Less than twelve hours since he'd walked out of that elegant office feeling like he'd been patted on the head and sent to play with the other children.

He'd barely slept. Had dropped by the library and then spent most of the night at his kitchen table with old engineering textbooks spread out around him, sketching rough diagrams of what he remembered from modern technology. Vacuum tubes arranged in configurations that wouldn't exist for another forty years. Power supplies that required components that hadn't been invented yet. Antenna designs that would look like science fiction to anyone in this decade.

He'd translated it all into something that might, possibly, be achievable with the current technology. Had dumbed it down. Had removed all the impossible parts and kept only what could theoretically work.

The result was a stack of papers covered in his handwriting, technical specifications that were maybe seventy percent fever dream and thirty percent actual engineering. Good enough to convince someone who knew what they were looking at. He hoped.

The call connected. Ringing. Once. Twice.

"Henderson Engineering."

The voice was brusque, impatient. A receptionist who'd answered this phone ten thousand times and found the experience progressively less interesting.

"Yes, hello," Vox said, pitching his voice into that register of professional confidence. "I'm looking to speak with Mr. Henderson about a consulting opportunity. Private project, very well funded."

"May I ask who's calling?"

"Vincent Whittman. I'm with..."

He paused. Saying "the television station" made him sound like he was calling about fixing a transmitter. Saying "I'm a meteorologist" would get him nowhere.

"I'm heading up a special technical project," he finished. "Radio transmission systems. I believe Mr. Henderson's expertise would be invaluable."

"One moment please."

The line went quiet. Not dead quiet. He could hear the faint buzz of the connection, the distant sound of an office in operation.

Around him, the newsroom continued its chaos. Someone dropped a stack of papers and cursed loudly. The argument about batting averages had escalated to the point where Sterling would probably intervene soon. The mimeograph machine kept screeching.

The line clicked back to life.

"Henderson." The voice was older. Gruff. The voice of a man who'd been interrupted from something important.

"Mr. Henderson, thank you for taking my call." Vox shifted in his chair, trying to block out the noise around him. "I'm Vincent Whittman, and I'm working on a revolutionary portable transmission system. High-fidelity, zero latency, completely independent of telephone infrastructure. I have preliminary schematics and I'm looking for an engineer of your caliber to help bring this to reality."

A pause.

"Son." Henderson's voice had shifted from gruff to patronizing. "What you're describing violates at least three laws of thermodynamics. Where did you say you got these schematics?"

"I developed them myself. The theory is sound, I just need someone with the practical expertise to..."

"You developed them." Henderson was clearly trying not to laugh. "What's your background? Where did you study?"

Vox's jaw tightened. "I have extensive practical knowledge of broadcast systems. I've been working in the industry for..."

"That's not what I asked. Did you study engineering? Do you have a degree?"

The typists chose that moment to all hit their carriage returns simultaneously. The sound was like a volley of gunfire.

"I'm currently working as the head meteorologist for..."

"Meteorologist." Henderson said it like he'd just identified a particularly interesting species of insect. "I see. Well, Mr. Whittman, I appreciate your enthusiasm, but what you're describing simply isn't possible with current technology. Perhaps in ten, twenty years, but not now. And frankly, if it were possible, actual engineers would be working on it. Not weathermen playing inventor."

The condescension was thick enough to cut with a knife.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have actual work to do. I'm sure you have some clouds to analyze or whatever it is you people do. Good day."

Click.

The dial tone buzzed in Vox's ear, mocking him.

He stared at the receiver for a moment, then carefully, deliberately placed it back in its cradle. Not a slam. Not yet. He still had more calls to make.

He pulled out his list. Fifteen names, all engineers with solid reputations in radio technology. He'd pulled them from trade journals in the library and advertisements in technical magazines.

He dialed the second number.

The next call went to a Professor Martin at Columbia University. Published extensively on radio wave propagation. Taught advanced courses on transmission theory.

The conversation lasted three minutes.

"Young man," Professor Martin said, his voice carrying the particular smugness of academia, "I have been teaching radio engineering at Columbia for twenty years. Twenty years. I think I know what is and isn't possible in my own field."

"With respect, Professor, the technology is evolving rapidly. What seemed impossible five years ago..."

"Your 'vision' is a fantasy. Pure science fiction. You clearly have no formal training in this area. Are you even an engineer?"

Vox's free hand clenched into a fist under the desk. "I have extensive practical knowledge of these systems. I've worked with..."

"I'm sure you have." The professor's tone suggested he was sure of nothing of the kind. "But practical knowledge and theoretical understanding are very different things. I suggest you stick to your weather forecasts and leave the engineering to people who actually understand the mathematics involved. Good day."

Click.

The third call was to a firm in Newark. The fourth to an independent consultant in Philadelphia. The fifth to a former Bell Labs engineer who'd gone private.

The responses varied in their specific wording but the theme was consistent.

Who are you? What are your credentials? Why should we take you seriously?

And then, inevitably: *Oh, you're a weatherman.*

Followed by some variation of polite dismissal ranging from "that's not really possible" to "maybe you should focus on your actual job" to outright laughter.

By the eighth call, Vox had stopped trying to be charming. He was just pushing through, mechanical and grim.

"Listen to me!" His voice was rising now, cutting through the newsroom noise. Several people glanced over. He didn't care. "I have the capital! I have the vision! All I need is someone with the technical expertise to build it!"

The engineer on the other end, some guy named Patterson, sounded amused. "And what's your title again, Mr. Whittman?"

"I'm the head meteorologist, but I'm leading this special project..."

Patterson started laughing. Actually laughing. The sound came through the phone line clear and mocking.

"Call me back when you're done with the weather report, kid."

Click.

Vox slammed the receiver down into its cradle.

The impact was loud enough to make the entire desk jump. The sound echoed through the newsroom, a sharp CLACK that cut through all the other noise like a gunshot.

For a moment, everything went quiet. The typists paused mid-keystroke. The sports argument died. Even the mimeograph machine seemed to hold its breath.

Then the noise rushed back in, louder than before. People returned to their work, but with that particular awareness that meant they'd noticed. They'd seen. The weatherman was having a bad day.

Vox sat there, hand still on the receiver, breathing hard through his nose.

This wasn't working. None of it was working. The schematics were solid, he knew they were solid, but nobody would even look at them because they came from a fucking weatherman.

In Hell, when he'd had an idea, he'd snapped his fingers and engineers appeared. Teams of them. The best minds in the afterlife, all scrambling to implement his vision because he was Vox and his word was law and nobody questioned whether he knew what he was talking about.

Here, he couldn't even get a callback.

"Whittman!"

The bellow came from across the newsroom, loud enough to make several people flinch.

Sterling stood in his office doorway, red-faced and glowering. His shirt was untucked on one side, his tie stained.

"Are you playing secretary on company time?! Get me the isobar charts! Five minutes ago!"

Vox's entire body tensed. The overlord, the confident CEO who'd been making calls and demanding respect, vanished like smoke.

Vincent scrambled to the surface.

"Yes, sir!" His voice jumped up half an octave, losing all authority. "Right away!"

He stood so fast his chair scraped backward and hit the wall. His papers scattered, the precious schematics sliding across the desk. He grabbed them frantically, shoving them into a folder, trying to look busy and purposeful and not at all like someone who'd just been caught doing personal business on company time.

The isobar charts. Right. Weather patterns. The thing he was actually employed to do.

They were in the filing cabinet. Three desks over. Which meant walking across the entire goddamn newsroom while everyone watched.

He grabbed the folder and started walking.

The typists watched him pass. Their expressions ranged from sympathetic to amused to completely indifferent. One of them, the blonde who always smelled like hairspray, actually smirked.

The sports department had resumed their argument but quieted slightly as he passed, just enough to make it clear they'd noticed his humiliation.

Someone near the supply closet stage-whispered to their colleague: "Rough day."

Soft laughter followed.

Vox kept his eyes forward, his jaw clenched, his stride purposeful. *Don't react. Don't show weakness. Vincent wouldn't react. Vincent would just do his job and be grateful he still had one.*

He reached the filing cabinet. Yanked open the drawer labeled "Meteorological Data - Current." Found the isobar charts, current pressure systems mapped across the Northeast. Pulled them out.

The walk back to Sterling's office felt longer. Everyone had returned to their work now, the moment of entertainment over, but Vox could still feel their awareness. The weatherman who'd been shouting into a phone about revolutionary technology was now scurrying across the newsroom with weather maps like a good little functionary.

He reached Sterling's office. Knocked twice.

"Enter!"

He entered.

Sterling was at his desk, papers spread everywhere, a cigar burning in the ashtray. The office smelled like smoke and sweat and stale coffee.

"Charts. Now."

Vox set them down. Sterling didn't look up.

"Anything else, sir?"

"Get out. And next time I ask for something, I want it immediately. Not after you're done with your personal phone calls. Understood?"

"Understood, sir."

Vox turned and walked out, closing the door softly behind him.

The walk back to his corner desk felt humiliating. His grand vision, his revolutionary technology, his scheme to impress Alastor and force his way into partnership, had just been reduced to this.

A weatherman. Playing with ideas above his station. Getting shouted at for neglecting his real job.

He sat down heavily in his chair. The folder with his schematics sat on the desk, mocking him. All that work. All those hours. All that technical knowledge he'd brought back from decades in the future.

Worthless.

Because he had the wrong title. Wrong credentials. Wrong everything.

Around him, the newsroom continued its relentless noise. The typewriters. The arguments. The mimeograph machine. All of it pressing in on him, reminding him exactly where he was in the hierarchy.

Nowhere.

The realization settled over him like cold water.

He couldn't do this the legitimate way.

The thought arrived clearly, cutting through his frustration. He'd been approaching this wrong. Completely wrong.

He'd been thinking like Vox. Like an Overlord who could command resources and respect with a snap of his fingers. But that wasn't his reality anymore.

He needed to think like Vincent. Like someone with no power, no credentials, no legitimate authority.

He pulled the schematics closer, studying them with fresh eyes. The problem wasn't the technology. The technology was solid, or as solid as it could be given the decade's limitations.

The problem was credibility.

No respected engineer would work with a weatherman. They saw the title and dismissed everything else. It didn't matter how good his ideas were. It didn't matter how sound his technical knowledge was. He was a weatherman, therefore he was an amateur, therefore he was wasting their time.

But what if he didn't approach respected engineers?

The thought expanded, branching into possibilities.

What if he found someone hungry? Someone brilliant but unrecognized? Someone who didn't have the luxury of turning down work because of who was offering it?

Graduate students. Research assistants. Junior engineers at big firms who were stuck doing grunt work. People who'd published interesting papers that nobody read because they didn't

have the right institutional backing. People with something to prove, who needed money and didn't ask too many questions about why a weatherman was funding cutting-edge technology development.

Vox pulled out a fresh piece of paper and started making a new list. Not famous names this time. Not professors or consultants or senior engineers.

Young names. Recent publications. People who'd presented at conferences but hadn't been hired yet. People who'd been fired or overlooked or stuck in dead-end positions despite obvious talent.

He'd find them. He'd offer them money and freedom and the chance to build something revolutionary. He'd be the patron, the visionary backer, the person who saw their potential when nobody else did.

And they'd be so grateful for the opportunity they wouldn't care that their patron spent his days drawing cloud formations.

The plan crystallized with satisfying clarity. This was better anyway. A desperate genius would work harder than a comfortable consultant. Would be more loyal. Would be less likely to ask inconvenient questions about why this technology needed to remain secret.

He was mid thought when he heard footsteps approaching his desk.

He looked up.

Margaret stood there, looking relaxed and happy. She was wearing a blue dress that was probably more expensive than his entire wardrobe. Her hair was styled in that way that looked effortless but required significant time and effort. She had a coffee cup in one hand and a small smile on her face.

"Rough morning?" Her tone was sympathetic. "I heard you on the phone earlier. Sounded intense."

Vox's hand went automatically to the schematics, covering them slightly. Not hiding them exactly. Just... being careful.

The Vincent mask slipped back into place. Tired. Slightly embarrassed. Definitely not furious at the entire engineering establishment.

"Just working on a personal project," he said. His voice carried the right note of self-deprecation. "Trying to get some technical advice. Not going well."

Margaret's smile turned more sympathetic. "I'm sorry. Is it something for the station?"

"No, it's..." He paused, an idea forming. "Actually, Margaret, you might be able to help."

Her expression brightened immediately. "Of course! What do you need?"

He leaned back in his chair, making it look casual. Friendly. Two colleagues chatting, nothing more.

"You have connections in the advertising world, right? You work with vendors, suppliers, that whole ecosystem?"

"Sure. All the time. Why?"

"Do you know anyone at RCA? Not the big executives," he added quickly, seeing her expression shift toward doubt. "I mean someone lower down. Junior marketing maybe? Or someone in their technical sales division? The kind of person who actually talks to the engineers?"

Margaret's brow furrowed slightly. "I might. We use RCA equipment for some of our broadcasts. I know a guy in their sales office. Why?"

Vox leaned forward, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "I'm trying to find real talent. Not the famous names, but the people doing actual innovative work. The ones who aren't getting recognition because they're too junior or too new. The engineers who are actually building things instead of just talking about them."

He gestured at the phone. "But every time I call somewhere asking for engineering help, they just hear 'meteorologist' and hang up. I need a different approach. Someone who can point me toward the right people without all the credential checking."

Understanding dawned in Margaret's eyes. "You want an insider's perspective."

"Exactly." Vox smiled, letting relief and gratitude color his expression. "Someone who knows who's actually good versus who just has impressive titles. And I thought, if anyone would know how to navigate that world, it would be you. You're so good at reading people and making connections."

The compliment landed perfectly. Margaret's posture straightened slightly. Her smile widened.

"I can definitely make some calls," she said. "My contact at RCA, Bill, he's always complaining about how the company overlooks their younger engineers. He might know exactly who you're looking for."

"That would be incredible." Vox nodded enthusiastically. "Thank you, Margaret. Really. I know you're busy, and this isn't even work related..."

"Oh, please." She waved a hand dismissively. "I'm happy to help. What are partners for?"

The word hung between them. Partners. She said it easily, naturally, like it was obvious.

"I'll make some calls this afternoon," Margaret continued, already planning. "Maybe I'll even take Bill to lunch next week. He loves that Italian place on Fifth. I bet I can get you at least two or three names of promising engineers."

"That's amazing," Vox said, and was surprised to find he meant it.

Margaret's smile turned slightly bashful. "I'll let you know what I find out. And Vincent? Don't let those stuffy engineers get you down."

She walked away, her heels clicking on the linoleum, leaving Vox alone at his desk.

He stared at the space where she'd been standing.

It had worked. Of course it had worked. He'd identified what she wanted, providing emotional validation and appreciation, and leveraged it to get what he needed, which was access to her professional network.

Classic manipulation. Textbook executive behavior. He'd done variations of this thousands of times.

So why did it feel so different this time?

Maybe because she'd called them partners and seemed to genuinely mean it. Maybe because she was helping not out of obligation or fear or calculated self-interest, but because she actually wanted him to succeed.

Or maybe he was just tired and overthinking things.

He shook off the thought and returned to his list of potential engineers. Margaret would provide leads. Good leads, probably. She was competent at her job despite her other flaws.

And he'd follow those leads. He'd find his hungry genius. He'd build the technology.

And he'd prove to Alastor that Vincent Whittman was not a contractor to be dismissed once the job was done.

The rest of Friday passed in a blur of weather maps and research. By five o'clock, his list had grown to twenty-three names. Young engineers. Recent graduates. People who'd been overlooked or underestimated.

One name kept catching his attention.

David. Twenty-six. Graduated top of his class from MIT. Published a revolutionary paper on signal processing that had been completely ignored by the establishment because he'd presented it at a minor conference instead of submitting it to the big journals. Hired by a rival radio station as a junior engineer, then fired six months later for "not being a team player."

Which probably meant he'd questioned his superiors' incompetence and paid the price. Rookie mistake.

Vox stared at the name. This could be his guy. Brilliant, hungry, recently humiliated. Someone who'd understand what it felt like to have good ideas dismissed because of who you were instead of what you knew.

He checked his watch. Five fifteen. The station's office phone system would be tying up for the day, people making final calls before heading home.

He grabbed his coat and his list and headed out.

The payphone was three blocks away, on the corner of Fifth and Madison. Vincent had used it before when he needed privacy for calls. It was far enough from the station that nobody would overhear, close enough that he could claim he'd just been running an errand if anyone asked.

The evening air was cold. The sun was already setting, painting the buildings in shades of orange and purple. Around him, the city was transitioning from workday to evening, people streaming out of offices and heading toward bars or dinner or home.

Vox reached the payphone, fed it a nickel, and dialed the number he'd found in the telephone directory.

It rang four times. He was preparing to hang up when someone answered.

"Hello?" The voice was young, cautious.

"David?"

A pause. "Yes. Who is this?"

"My name is Vincent Whittman." Vox pitched his voice differently this time. Not the pleading tone he'd used with the established engineers. Not the corporate smoothness he'd used with Margaret. Something else. Direct. Respectful. One professional to another.

"I read your paper on adaptive signal processing. The one from the Boston conference last year. It was brilliant."

Another pause, longer this time. "Thank you. Not many people read that one."

"Their loss." Vox leaned against the phone booth's wall, watching the street. "I'm calling because I have a private project. A portable, high-fidelity broadcast transmitter. I need

someone who actually understands the theoretical principles instead of just regurgitating what's in the textbooks."

He could hear David breathing on the other end. Interested but wary.

"I heard you recently left your position," Vox continued. "I also heard it wasn't your choice. I also heard your supervisors there were idiots who couldn't recognize talent if it bit them."

A short laugh came through the line. "You heard right on all counts. What's your angle?"

"No angle. I need an engineer. You need work. I can offer you a generous salary, complete creative freedom, and the chance to build something that doesn't exist yet." Vox let the words settle. "Plus unlimited budget for components and testing. If you need something, you get it. No arguments. No committees. No bureaucratic bullshit."

"That sounds too good to be true." David's voice had shifted. Still cautious, but engaged now. "What's the catch?"

"The catch is secrecy. This technology stays proprietary. You don't publish papers about it. You don't brag to colleagues. You build it, you make it work, and when it's done, you get paid very well and move on with your career."

"And who are you, exactly? Vincent Whittman. I don't recognize the name from any of the major firms."

Here it was. The moment where his credibility would either solidify or collapse.

"I'm not with a major firm," Vox said. "I'm an independent consultant working for a private client who values discretion. My background is in broadcast systems analysis. I know what needs to be built. I need someone who can actually build it."

It wasn't quite a lie. He was technically working for Alastor. He did technically analyze broadcast systems.

"What's the timeline?" David asked.

"As long as it takes to do it right. I don't want rushed work. I want perfection."

Another pause. Vox could practically hear the internal debate. Too good to be true versus desperate enough not to care.

"Can I see the specifications?" David asked finally.

"In person. Tomorrow morning. There's a diner called Murphy's on the corner of Eighth. Ten AM. I'll bring the schematics, you bring your questions."

"And if I don't like what I see?"

"Then you walk away. No hard feelings. But..." Vox let his voice drop lower. "I think you're going to like what you see."

Silence stretched for several seconds.

"Tomorrow," David said finally. "I'll be there."

"Excellent. One more thing."

"Yeah?"

"Bring your best ideas. I'm not looking for someone to just follow orders. I'm looking for someone who can make this better than I've even imagined."

He could hear the smile in David's voice. "Now you're speaking my language."

"See you Monday."

Vox hung up the phone and stood there for a moment, hand still on the receiver.

He'd done it. Found his engineer. Found someone hungry and brilliant and desperate enough to work with a weatherman without asking too many questions.

The first piece of the real plan was falling into place.

He turned and started walking back toward his apartment. The street was darker now, the evening deepening into night. The streetlamps had come on, casting pools of yellow light.

Vox smiled as he walked.

Tomorrow, he'd meet David. He'd show him the schematics. He'd convince him the vision was real.

And then he'd build the technology that would make him indispensable to Alastor.

Not a contractor to be dismissed. Not a temporary consultant.

A partner. Whether Alastor liked it or not.

Chapter End Notes

Discord link only for those who have reached this point. Vip club or whatever... No biggie...

https://discord.gg/qrPYTUrDZv

Chapter 23

The "On Air" light went dark at exactly midnight.

Alastor sat in the sudden silence, his hands still resting on the edge of the mixing board. The vacuum tubes behind him continued their soft hum, filaments glowing warm amber in the darkness. Outside the window, the city sprawled, most of its citizens already asleep or well on their way.

He reached over and switched off the microphone's power supply. The booth settled into its natural state: quiet, orderly, waiting for tomorrow's performance.

The ritual of post-broadcast cleanup was meditative. Alastor stood, straightening his jacket, and began the familiar sequence. Each record returned to its proper sleeve, each sleeve returned to its proper place on the shelf. Alphabetical by artist. No exceptions. No shortcuts.

His hands moved automatically while his mind wandered to tomorrow's scheduled meeting.

The weatherman.

Alastor had replayed their breakroom encounter perhaps a dozen times since Monday, each review extracting new details. The man was a walking contradiction. That pathetic performance with the advertising woman, the desperate touching and nervous energy. The lies about courtship that wouldn't convince a child.

But then the technical jargon. *That* had been different.

Alastor pulled out the cleaning cloth and began wiping down the turntable's surface in slow circles. The motion was soothing. The material reality of maintenance grounded him when his thoughts threatened to spiral.

Those weren't phrases from a manual. They were the vocabulary of someone who actually understood the mechanics. Who thought in terms of signal flow and frequency response and acoustic engineering principles.

The weatherman shouldn't know those things. Shouldn't speak that language with such casual fluency.

Unless he wasn't really a weatherman at all.

Alastor finished with the turntable and moved to the microphone, checking the suspension mount for any looseness. Everything tight. Everything perfect.

He thought about what Vincent had hinted at. A perfect remote feed. Broadcast-quality audio from anywhere in the city.

The professional implications were obvious. Cover live events without the usual circus of telephone company technicians and their invasive equipment. Broadcast from jazz clubs, political rallies, sporting events. Bring the city into his listeners' homes with unprecedented immediacy.

His competitors would be furious. They'd scramble to replicate it, throw money at their engineers, demand the same capability. But by then, he'd have months of market dominance. Maybe longer if Vincent was right about the difficulty.

Alastor coiled the microphone cable with practiced precision.

But the personal implications.

Those were far more interesting.

He walked to the window, hands clasped behind his back, and looked out at the dark streets below. A few cars moved through the pools of lamplight. A drunk stumbled past, singing something incomprehensible. A police officer walked his beat with mechanical regularity.

If everyone believed he was always in the studio during broadcasts, then being outside the studio during a broadcast became invisible. Impossible, therefore unthinkable.

The perfect alibi wasn't the one nobody questioned. It was the one nobody could conceive of questioning in the first place.

Alastor smiled at his reflection in the dark window.

The technology would change everything. Would transform constraint into freedom. Would allow him to move through the city undetected while his voice played over thousands of radios, creating the illusion of his presence here, in this room, safe and accounted for.

The implications were staggering.

But.

He turned away from the window, his smile fading into something more neutral.

The weatherman was a problem. Working with him would be exhausting. Managing him would be tedious. And keeping him quiet afterward might prove difficult if he decided his contribution deserved more recognition than a simple payment.

Alastor collected his coat from the rack by the door, pulling it on with smooth, practiced movements. Adjusted the collar. Buttoned it precisely.

The question was whether the reward justified the risk.

He looked around his studio. His domain. Built through years of careful cultivation. One wrong move, one suspicious circumstance, one piece of evidence linking him to something he shouldn't be linked to, and all of it would collapse.

The weatherman represented both opportunity and danger in equal measure.

Alastor turned off the overhead lights, leaving only the soft glow of the vacuum tubes. He stood in the amber dimness for a moment, considering.

Then he made his decision.

The risk was acceptable. The potential too valuable to ignore. He would control the meeting, assess the man's actual capabilities versus his obvious delusions, and if the vision proved substantive rather than fantasy, he would acquire it.

And Vincent Whittman would remain exactly what he appeared to be: a useful tool, nothing more.

Alastor locked the studio door behind him and headed home.

Tomorrow would be interesting, at least.

- - -

Friday morning arrived with grey skies and the promise of rain that wouldn't quite commit.

Alastor's morning routine was invariable. Coffee, black, prepared in the percolator he'd brought from back home. Toast with butter, no jam. The morning paper: international news, national news, local news, obituaries, entertainment. Sports discarded without reading.

He dressed with the same careful attention he applied to everything else. Every detail considered, every choice deliberate.

The walk to the station took twenty-three minutes at his preferred pace. He enjoyed walking. The city revealed itself differently on foot, showed him patterns the bus or subway obscured. Who moved through which neighborhoods at what times. Where the vulnerable congregated. Where opportunities presented themselves.

He arrived at the station at ten forty-five, earlier than necessary but late enough to avoid the morning rush. The lobby was quiet. The elevator operator, a young man named Thomas who smelled perpetually of hair tonic, nodded his greeting.

"Morning, Mr. Alastor."

"Good morning, Thomas. Lovely weather we're having."

The boy looked confused, glancing at the grey skies visible through the lobby windows. "Sir?"

“A figure of speech, Thomas.”

"Oh. Right. Ha."

The elevator lurched upward with its familiar groan. Alastor watched the floor numbers tick past, his face reflected in the polished brass doors.

The second floor hallway was busier than usual. Several men in expensive suits clustered near the conference room, speaking in low, important-sounding voices. Network executives, probably. Or advertisers. Alastor had learned to identify them by posture and tailoring.

He was halfway down the hall when Boucher appeared, moving with the urgency of a man who'd been waiting to ambush someone.

"Alastor! There you are. Do you have a moment?"

"Of course, Jonathan." Alastor's smile never wavered. "What can I do for you?"

Boucher glanced around, then lowered his voice conspiratorially. "The investor. Jean Beaumont. He's here. Early, naturally. The man has no concept of professional timing."

"And you need me to..." Alastor let the sentence trail off, already knowing the answer.

"Handle him." Boucher's expression was apologetic but firm. "He's from your neck of the woods. You two will get along splendidly, I'm sure. He's asking specifically about the expansion plans, and frankly, I'm sure you can explain it better than I do."

Alastor's smile remained fixed, but something cold flickered behind his eyes. His eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch, the only outward sign of his reaction.

Your neck of the woods.

The implication was clear and faintly insulting. You're both from the same area, speak French, both carry that particular cultural coding that makes northeastern businessmen vaguely uncomfortable. Therefore, you handle him.

But Alastor had learned years ago that correcting these assumptions created friction. Better to smile, accept the task, and file away another small piece of evidence about Jonathan Boucher's limitations.

"I'd be delighted," he said warmly. "Where is he?"

"Conference room. And Alastor?" Boucher touched his arm, the gesture meant to be reassuring. "Thank you. I know this isn't technically your responsibility, but you're so much better at the personal touch than I am."

"Happy to help," Alastor said.

He headed for the conference room, but paused at Barbara's switchboard station. She was working on something, her fingers moving across the board with that mechanical precision he found aesthetically pleasing.

"Barbara, a moment?"

She looked up, her expression shifting from neutral concentration to warm recognition. "Morning, Al. You're in early."

"Business calls. Listen, I'm expecting a guest later. A persistent agent from the television station."

Barbara's eyebrows rose, a smile playing at her lips. "Finally letting them put that face on camera?"

"Heavens, no." Alastor leaned against her desk, his posture casual. "This one has a proposition. Been chasing me all week."

Barbara's smile widened into something more mischievous. She waggled her eyebrows suggestively. "A proposition? Maybe she's got a crush on that voice of yours. You do have very nice diction."

"It's a he, my dear."

Barbara blinked, surprised, then her expression shifted into something conspiratorial. A little disappointed, perhaps, that the gossip was professional rather than romantic. "Oh! Well, a fella with a proposition. I should've known it was all business. Nothing fun ever happens around here."

"If he arrives while I'm with my sponsor," Alastor continued, "please ask him to wait. I don't want to be disturbed until I'm finished."

"Of course, Al." She made a note on her pad. "I'll tell him to sit tight. That chair's uncomfortable enough to keep anyone awake."

Alastor smiled. "You're invaluable, as always."

He continued to the conference room, pushing through the heavy door.

Jean Beaumont stood by the window, a man in his fifties with the kind of weathered face that suggested decades of hard living disguised as good times. He wore an expensive suit that somehow still managed to look rumpled, and his cologne was aggressive enough to smell from across the room.

"Alastor!" He turned, arms spread wide, his voice gravelly. "Finally!"

The next hour was an exercise in diplomatic endurance.

Jean had made his money in shipping and seemed to believe shared geography between the two of them created an instant brotherhood. He clapped Alastor on the shoulder repeatedly. He switched between English and French mid-sentence. He told long, meandering stories about people Alastor had never heard of, assuming familiarity based purely on regional origin.

Alastor maintained his smile. Laughed at the appropriate moments. Switched languages when Jean did.

They discussed the expansion plans. Jean wanted reassurance that his investment would generate returns. Alastor provided that reassurance with smooth, confident words about audience growth and advertising revenue and market dominance.

He was in the middle of explaining the five-year projection when he heard it.

Faint voices from the hallway. Muffled through the conference room door, but distinct enough to parse if you were listening.

Vincent had arrived.

Alastor kept some of his attention on Jean, nodding along to whatever the man was saying about shipping routes and distribution networks. But part of his mind tracked the timeline. Vincent was early. Twenty minutes early, if Alastor's internal clock was accurate.

Eager, then. Or nervous. Possibly both.

Jean was still talking, something about his nephew who played trumpet. Alastor made encouraging noises and steered the conversation back toward business. The contract. The signature. The actual reason they were in this room.

Twenty minutes later, Jean finally signed. His signature was large and looping, taking up half the page. He shook Alastor's hand with the grip of someone who thought firmness equaled trustworthiness.

"It was such a pleasure to meet you. Truly impressive, everything you've shared today."

"Indeed. Until next time."

Alastor saw him out, maintaining the warm facade until the man disappeared into the elevator. Then his expression settled into something more neutral as he turned back toward the hallway.

Barbara caught his eye as he approached. The bored neutrality of her face melted into a sly, amused look. She leaned slightly toward him, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"Your visitor fell asleep."

Alastor paused mid-step. "Pardon?"

"Out cold. Head against the wall. Been like that for fifteen minutes." She shook her head, her expression somewhere between sympathy and disdain. "Poor thing must be exhausted. Or maybe just boring himself to death waiting."

Alastor looked toward the chair. Sure enough, Vincent was slumped against the wall, his head tilted at an awkward angle, mouth slightly open. His jacket was wrinkled. His tie was crooked. He looked exactly like what he was: a man who'd had a very long night and a very early morning.

"He's such a creep," Barbara added, her whisper even quieter now. "He showed up looking like he'd slept in his clothes. Then tried making weird jokes and small talk. As if I'd waste my time on someone who can't even stay awake for a meeting."

Alastor felt something click into place. A puzzle piece finding its proper position.

So Vincent had tried bonding by being 'charming' to Barbara. And she, perceptive woman that she was, had identified him immediately as someone not worth her time or politeness.

It confirmed everything. The weatherman was exactly what he appeared to be: socially incompetent, emotionally unstable, and lacking any sense of professional grace.

Alastor sighed. A long, theatrical sound of profound disappointment.

He walked toward the chair, his footsteps deliberate on the linoleum. Vincent didn't stir. Just kept breathing with that slightly open-mouthed expression that made him look younger and more vulnerable than he probably was.

Alastor’s first instinct, a holdover from a lifetime of feigned politeness, was to reach out and gently nudge the man’s shoulder.

He stopped himself, his hand hovering in the air. *Why should he be gentle?* He was not Vincent's valet. He had cleared his schedule for this meeting, and the man had the audacity to fall asleep in the waiting area.

Annoyance, sharp and clean, cut through his curiosity.

He raised his hand and rapped his knuckles sharply against the wooden armrest.

Vincent jerked awake with a gasp, his whole body spasming. His head snapped up so fast something in his neck cracked audibly. For a moment, his eyes were completely unfocused, panic and disorientation fighting for dominance on his face.

Alastor allowed himself the faintest, imperceptible smile of satisfaction at the effect.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Vincent." Alastor kept his voice cheerful, pleasant. "I do hope your dreams were pleasant."

Vincent scrambled to his feet, nearly tripping. "I wasn't... I was just resting my eyes."

Of course he was.

Alastor let his gaze travel over Vincent's appearance with deliberate slowness. The wrinkled jacket. The crooked tie. The shoes that looked expensive but worn. And then, there it was. His left cheek.

The skin was slightly puffy. Not bruised, but inflamed. The kind of swelling that came from impact, probably twelve to twenty-four hours old based on the degree of healing visible.

Alastor tilted his head, examining it.

"My, my. Your face appears... asymmetrical this evening."

Vincent's hand shot to his cheek immediately. A tell. An admission. "What?"

"Is your left cheek swollen?"

Alastor leaned in closer, watching Vincent's pupils dilate. The man was panicking. Good. Panic made people reveal things.

"I... got into a fight."

The lie was so transparent it was almost insulting. A fight implied two participants, mutual combat, some degree of competence on both sides.

The swelling pattern was wrong for that. It was centralized, suggesting a single impact rather than multiple strikes. And the location, high on the cheekbone rather than the jaw or nose, suggested someone falling rather than being struck.

More importantly, Vincent's body language was all wrong. He wasn't puffing up with masculine pride about winning a fight. He was shrinking, defensive, trying to make himself

smaller.

This wasn't a fight. This was an accident. A fall, probably. Something embarrassing that he was desperate to reframe as something more impressive.

Alastor let his smile widen. Time to test the theory.

"A fight. Really? With whom?"

He leaned in even closer, invading Vincent's space deliberately. Watching him press back against the chair, trapped, nowhere to go.

"Tell me, Vincent. Are you a good fighter?"

Vincent puffed up immediately, predictable as clockwork. "The best."

The lie was so obvious, so desperate, that Alastor couldn't help himself.

He laughed. Sharp and genuine. "Could have fooled me."

The expression on Vincent's face. Humiliation and fury fighting for dominance.

Alastor straightened, the examination complete. He'd learned what he needed to know. Vincent had been in some kind of accident. Had injured himself through clumsiness or bad luck. Was ashamed enough to lie about it. And was so insecure about his masculinity that he couldn't admit to simple human fallibility.

Useful information. Exploitable information.

"Come along," Alastor said, turning toward his office. "Let's not waste any more of our valuable time. We have business to discuss."

He walked without looking back, confident Vincent would follow. People always followed when you acted like their following was inevitable.

The office was exactly as he'd left it. Perfectly organized. Not a single item out of place. He heard Vincent's sharp intake of breath as the man stepped inside, probably noticing the records, the equipment, the sheer orderliness of everything.

This was good. Let him be intimidated.

Alastor moved to the bar cart without preamble. "Drink, Vincent?"

He didn't wait for an answer. The question was rhetorical. The host offers, the guest accepts. That's how this worked.

He poured two glasses of whiskey, measuring each portion with practiced precision. The sound of liquid hitting crystal was the only noise in the room. He could feel Vincent's nervous energy behind him, the man probably trying to figure out what to say, how to act.

Alastor was still pouring when Vincent spoke.

"God, that woman at the desk. She's a real piece of work, isn't she?"

The words landed in the quiet room like a stone dropped into still water.

Alastor stopped pouring.

He turned his head slightly. Just enough to look at Vincent out of the corner of his eye.

The weatherman was smiling. That try-hard, desperate-to-connect smile of someone who thought they'd found common ground.

He was attempting to bond. By being cruel. By insulting Barbara, who'd done nothing except her job with her usual efficiency and professionalism.

The calculation was so obvious it was almost sad. Vincent had decided that shared contempt for "lesser" people would establish them as equals. Would create camaraderie through mutual condescension.

It revealed everything about how he saw the world. How he thought relationships worked. How little he actually understood about real power.

Real power didn't need to punch down. Real power simply was.

"You think so?" Alastor kept his voice soft. Neutral. Giving Vincent just enough rope.

And Vincent, predictably, hanged himself with it.

"Yeah! So dry. No personality whatsoever. Zero warmth. I tried making conversation and she acted like I was furniture. I bet she's a real joy at parties."

The contempt was genuine. The pettiness absolute. Vincent was actually offended that Barbara hadn't been charmed by him, hadn't recognized his inherent importance and value.

Alastor turned back to the glasses. Finished pouring the second one with the same precise measurement as the first. Set the bottle down with a soft clink.

He sighed softly, a quiet, private exhalation, wishing just a little that he could slip something more permanent into Vincent’s glass as he poured it.

"I find her quite personable." His tone was conversational. Pleasant. Revealing nothing about his inner thoughts. "And efficient."

He picked up both glasses. Turned to face Vincent fully. And delivered the final judgment with surgical precision.

"And she doesn't meddle."

He watched the realization hit. Saw Vincent's expression shift from confident bonding attempt to sudden, mortified understanding. The flush creeping up his neck. The way his jaw clenched.

The man couldn't handle being corrected without taking it personally.

Alastor crossed the room and extended one glass toward Vincent. "Your drink."

Vincent took it with mechanical movements, the social script overriding his embarrassment.

Alastor moved past him to the desk. He didn't sit immediately. Instead, he stood there for a moment, surveying the room from his position of power. Then he lowered himself into the chair with deliberate grace, the leather creaking softly.

He set his own glass down on the desk, precisely centered on its coaster. Steepled his fingers. Fixed Vincent with his full attention.

"You spoke of remote transmission. Explain."

The transformation was immediate and striking.

Vincent's entire demeanor changed. The nervous, twitchy weatherman receded. Something else emerged. Something focused and confident and genuinely knowledgeable.

He leaned forward, not aggressively but with engagement. His free hand came up, gesturing as he spoke. His voice dropped into a different register, losing the desperate edge and gaining professional authority.

And then he launched into his pitch.

Alastor listened with genuine attention. He'd heard hundreds of pitches over the years. Most were transparent garbage, people trying to sell him things he didn't need with logic that didn't hold up to basic scrutiny.

This was different.

Vincent knew what he was talking about. The technical details were accurate. The pain points he identified were real, problems Alastor had encountered personally. The vision he painted, of seamless remote broadcasting with no quality degradation, was precisely what Alastor had imagined himself after their breakroom conversation.

But more than the technical competence, it was the way Vincent spoke. He wasn't reciting from a manual or repeating things he'd heard. He was thinking through the problems in real time, connecting concepts, building logical chains from principle to application.

This was real expertise. Not the fake confidence of someone who'd read a few articles, but the deep understanding of someone who'd lived inside these systems.

The weatherman shouldn't be this knowledgeable. Couldn't be this knowledgeable, not through any legitimate pathway.

Which meant either Vincent was lying about his background, or he'd acquired this knowledge through some other means. Possibly through connections Alastor didn't know about yet.

More importantly, Vincent kept drinking.

Small sips at first, using the glass as a prop to punctuate his points. Then larger drinks as he got more animated, more caught up in his own presentation. The whiskey was relaxing him, loosening his tongue, making him more expressive.

He was so focused on his pitch that he wasn't paying attention to anything else. Wasn't noticing that Alastor hadn't touched his own glass. Wasn't registering the power dynamic being established.

A reliable method, Alastor thought with satisfaction. A glass of whiskey and a receptive ear, and he will tell me anything. A useful weakness.

The pitch continued. Vincent was painting pictures of freedom and independence. Of broadcasting from anywhere. Of breaking the telephone company's stranglehold on remote feeds.

All true. All valuable.

But beneath the professional benefits, Alastor could see the real application. The one Vincent hadn't explicitly mentioned.

The pitch reached its conclusion. Vincent took a final, triumphant gulp of his whiskey and set the empty glass down on the edge of the desk.

Then his gaze flickered to Alastor's glass.

Still full. Completely untouched.

Alastor watched Vincent's expression shift. Saw the confidence drain away, replaced by paranoia and realization. The weatherman's pupils dilated slightly.

He noticed. He's not as blind as I thought.

Interesting. Most people never caught the drink disparity. They were too focused on their own consumption, their own performance. But Vincent had noticed, and was now clearly second-guessing everything about the interaction.

Uncertainty made people more compliant.

Alastor leaned forward, deciding to move to the close while Vincent was still reeling.

"A compelling vision, Vincent." He let sincerity color his voice. "However, for such an advantage to be truly effective, it must remain an advantage. My advantage."

He explained the non-negotiable condition. Absolute discretion. Complete secrecy. No bragging, no papers, no casual mentions.

He framed it as competitive advantage. Protection against rival networks stealing the technology. But he watched Vincent's eyes, looking for recognition of the real reason.

And there it was. A flicker of understanding. A slight change in Vincent's expression that suggested he'd connected the dots. The weatherman knew and was carefully not acknowledging it. Which meant he was either complicit or planning to use that knowledge later.

Both options were concerning. But manageable.

"Of course," Vincent said, his voice earnest and trustworthy. "I understand completely. Full discretion. Nobody will hear a word from me."

He held Alastor's gaze with surprising steadiness. "Our secret weapon."

Alastor studied him for a long moment. Looking for cracks in the facade. For dishonesty beyond the baseline dishonesty he'd already established.

But Vincent's expression remained sincere. Open. The face of a man who understood the gravity of secrets.

A performance. Obviously a performance. But a good one.

Alastor stood, the motion signaling the meeting's end. Time to establish the terms and set expectations.

"Excellent. Then I believe we have an arrangement." He moved around the desk toward the door. "You will find the engineers. You will oversee the project. You will deliver me this vision you've described."

He reached the door. Paused with his hand on the knob. Looked back at Vincent, letting his expression settle into something pleasant and utterly final.

"It will be a simple, transactional affair, of course. You provide the technology, I provide handsome compensation for your time and expertise. And once the work is complete, we can go our separate ways. No complications. No entanglements. Clean and professional."

The flash of fury in Vincent's eyes was immediate and intense. Quickly suppressed, but not before Alastor caught it.

Ah. He had been hoping for something more. Partnership, perhaps. Long-term association. Some kind of elevated status. He'd been disappointed.

This was okay. Disappointment was a tool. It created hunger. Made people work harder to prove themselves worthy of more than they'd been offered.

"I'll be in touch with the initial specifications and budget parameters early next week. Do have a pleasant evening, Vincent."

Alastor opened the door. The hallway's harsh fluorescent light spilled in, destroying the office's warm ambiance.

Vincent walked to the door, his movements stiff. Stepped into the hallway. The door clicked shut behind him with a soft, final sound.

Alastor stood there for a moment, hand still on the knob, listening to Vincent's footsteps recede down the hallway.

Then he turned back to his office. Walked to the window. Looked out at the city, hands clasped behind his back.

The street below was busy with evening traffic. People heading home, heading to dinner, heading to whatever small dramas filled their lives.

Alastor reached for his glass of whiskey. The one he'd poured for himself but never touched. Swirled the liquid, watching it catch the light.

The weatherman was brilliant. Genuinely, undeniably brilliant. The technical vision was sound, possibly revolutionary. If Vincent could actually deliver what he'd promised, it would change everything.

But... He was also unstable. Emotionally volatile. A bad liar with obvious insecurities and a desperate need for validation. The kind of person who invented romances and insulted secretaries and fell asleep in waiting rooms.

The kind of person who might become a liability.

Alastor had taken on risky associates before. Had managed difficult personalities, leveraged their strengths while containing their weaknesses. It was a skill he'd honed over years of navigating social and professional hierarchies.

But Vincent represented a particularly complicated variable. High reward, high risk. Brilliant but unreliable. Knowledgeable but dishonest.

The kind of hire that could either elevate everything or burn it all down.

Alastor took a small, thoughtful sip of the whiskey. The first of the night. It burned pleasantly going down, warming his chest.

He'd made his decision. The potential was too valuable to ignore. The technology too transformative to pass up because of concerns about the engineer's personality.

He would acquire the technology. Would manage Vincent carefully, maintaining clear boundaries and explicit expectations. Would extract maximum value while minimizing risk.

And if Vincent became too much of a threat?

Well. Problems had solutions. Some permanent, some temporary. All effective when applied with proper timing and technique.

Alastor finished the whiskey, setting the empty glass down on his desk with a soft click.

He collected his coat, pulled it on with practiced movements. Adjusted the collar. Buttoned it precisely.

He turned off the lights. Locked the door. Headed down the hallway past Barbara's empty switchboard station, his footsteps echoing in the quiet building.

Outside, the evening had deepened into night. The streetlamps cast their usual yellow light. The fog was rolling in from the river, making the city look softer, more mysterious.

Alastor walked home through the thickening mist, hands in his pockets, mind already moving to his evening plans.

The weatherman would either prove himself useful or prove himself disposable.

Time would tell which.

But either way, Alastor would get what he wanted.

He always did.

Chapter 24

Vox arrived at the diner fifteen minutes early, a calculated decision. Being first meant choosing the table, controlling the environment, establishing himself as the person in charge rather than the person being evaluated.

He selected a booth near the back, far enough from the counter that their conversation wouldn't be overheard but close enough to the kitchen that the ambient noise would provide cover. He ordered coffee. It arrived in a chipped mug that had probably been white once but was now the color of old teeth.

The coffee tasted like it had been brewed sometime yesterday and left on the burner to achieve maximum bitterness. Vox drank it anyway. He needed the caffeine. He'd spent most of Friday night and all of Saturday morning refining the schematics, breaking them down into discrete components, compartmentalizing the design so no single engineer would see the full picture.

The power supply. The transmitter. The antenna array. Three separate systems that would work independently but integrate seamlessly. Only Vox would know how they fit together. Only Vox would understand what they were actually building.

It was the kind of operational security he'd used in Hell. Compartmentalization. Need to know basis. Never let the left hand know what the right hand was doing.

He checked his watch. Nine fifty eight.

The door opened, bell chiming overhead. A young man stepped in, looking around with the cautious wariness of someone walking into a potentially bad situation.

David was exactly what his credentials suggested. Mid twenties, wearing clothes that were clean but clearly bought on a budget. Wire rimmed glasses. Hair slightly too long, like he'd

been too busy to get it cut. He carried a leather satchel that looked well used, the kind engineering students developed emotional attachments to.

Their eyes met. David approached the booth with measured steps.

"Mr. Whittman?"

"Vincent, please." Vox stood, extended his hand. "Thank you for coming. Can I get you coffee?"

David glanced at the mug on the table, clearly registering its dubious quality. "Sure. Why not."

He slid into the opposite side of the booth. Vox flagged down the waitress, a woman in her fifties who looked like she'd been working this shift for decades. She poured David's coffee without comment and disappeared back toward the kitchen.

David took a sip. Made a face. Set the mug down.

"So," he said, his tone carefully neutral. "You have a project."

"I do." Vox pulled out the folder he'd brought. Not the full schematics. Just the first component. The power supply. "Before we get into details, I want to make sure we're on the same page about confidentiality. What we discuss here stays between us. Agreed?"

David's eyebrows rose slightly. "That serious?"

"That proprietary." Vox opened the folder, turned it so David could see. "This is advanced work. Cutting edge. I need someone who can build it, not someone who'll run to Popular Mechanics with the design."

David leaned forward, his skepticism momentarily forgotten as he looked at the schematic. His eyes tracked across the diagram with the focus of someone who actually understood what they were seeing.

"Stabilized portable power supply," he said after a moment. His finger traced the vacuum tube configuration. "High output, low ripple. This is clever. The feedback loop here, using the secondary transformer winding to regulate the primary."

"Can you build it?"

David was still studying the schematic. "Yeah. Absolutely. But this level of stability requires precision components. The tolerances are tight. It'll be expensive."

"Cost isn't a concern."

"And what's it for?" David looked up, his expression shifting back to cautious. "This is a lot of power for something portable. Too much for a radio. Too stable for industrial equipment. What exactly are you building?"

Vox had prepared for this question. Had spent an hour crafting the lie until it sounded natural.

"Short wave radio equipment. High end amateur radio systems for enthusiasts." He kept his tone casual, like it was obvious. "There's a growing market for portable transceivers. People want to take their equipment camping, to field days, that sort of thing. But current battery systems are unreliable. They fluctuate, cause interference, burn out tubes prematurely."

He gestured at the schematic. "This solves that problem. Stable, portable power that performs like mains current. You could run a full transceiver setup from a car battery and never know the difference."

David's expression suggested he was buying it. Mostly. "Amateur radio. Okay. That makes sense, actually. The FCC regulations are getting looser, more people getting licensed." He tapped the schematic. "But this is professional grade engineering. Way beyond what hobbyists usually need."

"Which is why it'll sell." Vox leaned back, projecting confidence. "The serious operators, the ones who compete, who care about performance, they'll pay premium prices for premium equipment. We're not targeting the casual weekend warrior. We're targeting the dedicated enthusiast with money to spend."

The logic was sound enough that David nodded slowly. "Who's 'we'? You said you're an investor. Who else is involved?"

"I have an interested party. A partner who's providing capital."

"Like your boss?"

The word hit Vox like a physical blow. His jaw clenched automatically, his entire body tensing before he could stop himself.

"Listen." His voice came out sharper than intended. He modulated it, pulling back slightly, but keeping the edge. "I don't have a boss. Okay? Let's be very clear on that. This is my project. My design. My vision. I'm the one making this happen."

David's eyes widened slightly. He raised both hands in a placating gesture. "Whoa, okay. Your project. No problem. I didn't mean to..."

"The investor is a silent partner," Vox continued, forcing his voice back to professional. "They're providing capital in exchange for returns. Standard arrangement. But the technical work, the engineering, the actual creation of the product? That's all me. I'm the principal. Not an employee."

David nodded quickly. "Got it. Understood. You're the boss."

"Exactly."

The tension hung in the air for a moment. David took another sip of his terrible coffee, clearly using the action to give both of them time to reset.

"So," he said finally. "Assuming I'm interested, what's the timeline and compensation?"

They talked details for another twenty minutes. Vox outlined the payment structure. Generous up front, more upon completion, bonuses for meeting deadlines. David asked technical questions about the design, pointing out potential issues with thermal management, suggesting alternative component configurations.

The conversation shifted from interview to collaboration. Two people discussing problems and solutions. It felt natural. Right. This was what Vox was actually good at.

By the time they finished their terrible coffee, David had agreed. Two weeks to build and test the power supply. Complete discretion. No more questions about the end application.

They shook hands outside the diner. David headed east toward the subway. Vox headed west, hands in his pockets, mind already racing ahead to the next steps.

He had his first engineer. The plan was in motion. One component down, many more to go.

The morning was cold but clear. The city was quiet in that particular Saturday way, the weekday urgency replaced by something slower, more relaxed. A few people were out doing errands. A woman walked past with a small dog on a leash. A man was washing the windows of his shop, whistling tunelessly.

Vox walked past a payphone on the corner of the street.

He stopped.

Looked at it.

If he had his number, he could call Alastor. Give him an update. Show him how quickly things were moving. How competent and efficient Vincent Whittman was. How the project was already progressing faster than expected.

His hand was halfway to his pocket, reaching for change, before his brain caught up to his impulse.

He froze.

What the hell was he doing?

The realization hit with uncomfortable clarity. He was acting like an eager subordinate. Like some puppy desperate for a pat on the head from its owner. Ready to run up wagging his tail to show off the trick he'd just learned.

That wasn't the dynamic. That wasn't the plan. He was supposed to be Vox, master manipulator, playing chess while everyone else played checkers. Not Vincent, desperate weatherman, seeking approval from the radio host who'd dismissed him.

"Ew," he muttered aloud. A passing woman gave him a strange look. He ignored her.

Why was he so desperate for Alastor's approval? It was disgusting. Beneath him. He had been an Overlord and Alastor was, by all accounts, merely a radio host in this reality. He didn't need validation from some serial killer with a microphone.

Unless that's exactly the persona he *should* be projecting.

The thought formed with satisfying logic. Of course. He wasn't actually desperate for approval. He was performing desperation. If he acted like the eager employee, the loyal subordinate who lived for praise and validation, then Alastor would underestimate him. Would see him as a harmless, useful instead of a potential threat.

It was the perfect cover. The perfect mask.

Vox pulled his hand back from his pocket. Straightened his coat. Started walking again.

He wouldn't call. That would be too eager. Too obvious. But he would draft a progress report for Monday. Something professional but enthusiastic. The tone of someone who was genuinely excited to be working on this project, who saw it as the opportunity of a lifetime, who just wanted to prove himself worthy of Alastor's trust.

The performance would be flawless. And underneath it, he'd be building his own power base. His own network. His own path to partnership whether Alastor wanted it or not.

By the time he reached his apartment, the plan had evolved. He'd send weekly updates. He'd be responsive and available. He'd present himself as the ideal contractor: skilled, discreet, and just grateful enough to be working with someone as important as Alastor.

It was manipulation. Pure and simple. And it would work because everyone underestimated the desperate.

He spent the rest of Saturday drafting the report, refining the language until every word projected exactly the right combination of competence and deference.

By evening, he was satisfied. Monday, he'd deliver it personally. Another chance to be seen, to be valuable, to embed himself deeper into Alastor's operations.

He went to bed early, confident in his strategy.

He had no idea Sunday was about to happen.

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The church was everything Vox had feared it would be.

Stone exterior, Gothic revival architecture, stained glass windows depicting various saints in poses of ecstatic suffering. Inside, hard wooden pews that had probably been designed specifically to make people uncomfortable, as if physical discomfort brought you closer to God.

Vox sat next to Margaret in a pew near the middle. Not too far back, which would seem disengaged. Not too far forward, which would seem presumptuous. Exactly where a respectable, moderately devout young man would sit.

His hands were clasped in his lap. His head was bowed at the appropriate moments. His expression was one of thoughtful piety, like he was really contemplating the mysteries of faith rather than calculating exactly how long he'd have to maintain this charade.

The priest was an older man with that particular combination of theatrical gravitas and genuine belief that made him simultaneously convincing and absurd. His voice boomed through the space, amplified by the cathedral acoustics.

"...and they," he intoned, spreading his arms wide like he was personally introducing them, "are beings of pure light and goodness. They stand before the throne of the Almighty, singing eternal praises. They are the warriors of righteousness, the messengers of divine will, the protectors of the faithful!"

Vox kept his expression neutral. Bowed his head slightly lower. Tried not to think about the actual angels he'd encountered.

The priest continued, his voice dropping to something darker. More ominous. "But there are also the fallen. Those who turned away from God's light and plunged into eternal darkness. Hell, my children. A place of fire and brimstone and eternal torment. Where the wicked are punished for their sins. Where demons torment the damned for all eternity!"

He was really getting into it now, pacing back and forth, his robes swishing dramatically.

"The fires of Hell burn without consuming! The screams of the damned echo through endless caverns! The demons, twisted and grotesque, delight in the suffering of those who chose sin over salvation!"

Vox sat very still, his internal monologue providing real time corrections.

The disconnect was jarring. The priest was describing something that bore almost no resemblance to what Vox had actually experienced. It was like listening to someone describe a country based entirely on stories they'd heard from people who'd never been there.

"And the divine," the priest was saying, returning to the theme, "watch over us. They guide us. They protect us from the forces of darkness that seek to drag us down into that eternal pit!"

Vox remembered the white light. The searing indifference of whatever had grabbed him and thrown him back through time. That hadn't felt like protection or guidance. It had felt like being processed. Like being a file that had been flagged for review and then shoved into a different cabinet.

No warmth, no love and definitely no divine compassion. Just cold, bureaucratic efficiency. *You failed. Try again. Do better this time.*

The priest's voice rose to a crescendo. "But we need not fear! For if we live righteously, if we follow God's commandments, if we resist temptation and choose the path of light, we will be welcomed into Heaven! Into eternal paradise! Into the presence of the Divine!"

The congregation murmured agreement. Some woman near the front said "Amen" loudly.

Vox's hands tightened in his lap.

The sermon was so simplistic. So theatrical. So completely divorced from any actual metaphysical reality that it made his own memories feel unreal.

What if he was insane?

The thought arrived unbidden, unwanted, cold as ice water down his spine.

What if he'd just hit his head? Fallen one day, cracked his skull on the pavement, and hallucinated the entire thing? Decades of false memories created by a damaged brain trying to make sense of trauma?

What if he was just Vincent Whittman, pathetic weatherman, who'd developed some kind of obsessive delusion about being a demon from hell? Who'd fixated on a random radio host and constructed an entire fantasy to justify his behavior?

What if Hell wasn't real? What if none of it was real?

He frowned, forcing his hands to unclench.

No.

He remembered the pain. The specific, undeniable reality of not being able to harm Margaret. That wasn't a hallucination. That was sensory experience.

He remembered the technology he was designing. The components from decades in the future that he was translating back into 1950s equivalents. He couldn't have invented that from nothing. Couldn't have pulled advanced broadcast engineering out of his ass.

He remembered Hell. The exact smell of his office, ozone and the particular scent of overheated electronics.

The priest was wrapping up now, his voice softening into something more pastoral. "Go forth, my children, and walk in the light. Resist temptation. Choose righteousness. And know that the angels watch over you, always."

The congregation stood. Vox stood with them. They sang a hymn he didn't know the words to. He vaguely mouthed along, letting the sound wash over him.

Margaret squeezed his hand. Her palm was warm, slightly damp. She smiled at him, radiant and trusting.

He smiled back.

The service ended. People filed out slowly, chatting with neighbors, making plans for lunch. The priest stood near the door, shaking hands, offering blessings.

Vox followed Margaret through the crowd, ready to escape into the cold morning air and put this entire experience behind him.

That's when he heard Margaret's voice, bright and excited.

An older couple materialized from the crowd. The man was tall, broad shouldered, wearing a suit that was probably expensive twenty years ago. The woman was shorter, elegant in that understated way wealthy women cultivated, her hair perfectly styled, her jewelry real but modest.

They descended on Margaret with the warmth of parents who genuinely liked their daughter. Hugs. Kisses on both cheeks. The kind of easy affection that suggested a stable, functional family.

Then they turned to Vox.

"Mother, Father, this is Vincent!" Margaret's voice was practically vibrating with excitement. "Vincent Whittman. I've told you about him."

Mr. Holloway extended his hand. Vox took it.

The handshake was crushing. Not aggressive, just powerful. The grip of a man who'd worked with his hands at some point in his life, probably decades ago, and had maintained that strength through whatever white collar career he'd moved into.

"Vincent. Good to meet you." Mr. Holloway's voice was deep, carrying that particular note of paternal assessment. "Margaret's spoken very highly of you."

"The pleasure is mine, sir." Vox kept his voice respectful. Warm but not overly familiar. "You have a wonderful daughter. She's been invaluable at the station."

Mrs. Holloway's hand was softer but her grip was just as evaluative. She held his hand a moment longer than necessary, her eyes tracking over his face with the precision of someone conducting an inspection.

"What unusual eyes you have, dear." Her tone was pleasant. Curious. "Very striking."

Vox had prepared for this. Had practiced the response until it sounded natural.

"A genetic quirk from my father's side. My grandmother had it as well." The lie came smoothly. "I'm told it made her quite memorable at parties."

Mrs. Holloway smiled, but her eyes never stopped evaluating. "I'm sure it did."

"You must join us for Sunday lunch, Vincent!" Mr. Holloway's tone made it clear this wasn't a request. "We always have a meal after service. Family tradition. And anyone courting our daughter is practically family already."

Vox opened his mouth to politely decline. "Oh, I couldn't possibly impose..."

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Holloway had already hooked her arm through his. "It's no imposition at all. We insist. Don't we, dear?"

"Absolutely." Mr. Holloway was already steering them toward the parking lot. "The car's just over here."

Vox found himself being herded like livestock. Margaret was on his other side, beaming. Her parents had formed a pincer movement, cutting off any escape route.

Before he could mount a proper protest, he was being guided into the backseat of a substantial Buick. Margaret slid in next to him. The doors closed with solid, expensive sounding thuds.

He was trapped.

Mr. Holloway started the engine. Mrs. Holloway turned around in the passenger seat, her body angled so she could look directly at Vox. The car pulled out of the parking lot.

"So, Vincent," Mrs. Holloway began, her smile pleasant and her eyes sharp. "Tell us about your family. Margaret mentioned you lost your father young?"

Here we go.

"Yes, ma'am. Heart attack when I was twelve." The lie was well rehearsed. "My mother raised me and my sisters alone. It was difficult, but she managed beautifully. Strong woman."

"And where is she now?"

"Passed away about eighteen months ago. Cancer." He let his voice drop, injecting genuine sounding grief. "She held on long enough to see me established in my career. That meant everything to her."

Mrs. Holloway's expression softened. "I'm so sorry, dear. That must have been very difficult."

"It was. But she taught me the importance of hard work and perseverance. Everything I am, I owe to her."

Mr. Holloway's eyes found him in the rearview mirror. "And what exactly is it you do at the station? Margaret mentioned you're in broadcasting?"

"I'm the meteorologist, sir. I prepare the weather forecasts and deliver the on air segments. But I'm also working on several special projects. Technical consulting, that sort of thing."

"Ambitious." Mr. Holloway's tone suggested this could be either a compliment or a criticism depending on how the rest of the conversation went. "A young man should be ambitious. Within reason."

The interrogation continued. They asked about his education. Fictional high school in a small town. Some college, interrupted by his mother's illness, completed later through extension programs. It was vague enough to be hard to verify, specific enough to sound plausible.

They asked about his prospects. His plans for advancement. Whether he intended to stay in broadcasting or move into other industries.

Vox answered everything with practiced ease. The respectful young man with modest ambitions and strong family values. The kind of person who'd make a good husband for their daughter. Stable, reliable, appropriately deferential to his elders.

The car pulled up in front of a house in a nice neighborhood. Not wealthy, but solidly upper middle class. Two stories, well maintained, with a small front garden that showed signs of careful attention.

They filed inside. The interior was exactly what Vox had expected. Comfortable furniture that had been selected for durability rather than fashion. Family photos on every available surface. A piano in the living room that looked actually used. Everything clean and organized and radiating that particular aura of domestic stability.

Mrs. Holloway headed for the kitchen. "I'll just get lunch started. Margaret, dear, come help me. Vincent, make yourself comfortable. Franklin will keep you company."

Franklin. That was Mr. Holloway's first name, apparently.

Margaret followed her mother, leaving Vox alone with her father.

Mr. Holloway gestured to the living room. "Drink? I have bourbon."

"That would be lovely, thank you."

They settled into armchairs. Mr. Holloway poured two generous measures of bourbon into crystal glasses. Handed one to Vox. Took a sip of his own.

"So." Mr. Holloway's voice was casual but his eyes were sharp. "What are your intentions toward my daughter?"

And there it was. The question every father asked, regardless of decade or circumstance.

Vox took a sip of his bourbon. He let the warmth settle in his chest before responding.

"Your daughter is an exceptional woman, sir. Intelligent, capable, professional. I have the utmost respect for her."

"That's not what I asked."

Fair enough.

"My intention is to continue getting to know her," Vox said carefully. "To see if we're compatible for something long term. I'm not a man who takes relationships lightly. If this progresses, if we both feel it's right, then eventually..." He let the implication hang. "But I want to do things properly. Respectfully."

Mr. Holloway nodded slowly. "You have a steady job. Prospects for advancement?"

"Yes, sir. I'm being considered for several positions. The work I'm doing now is building a strong foundation."

"Good. Margaret deserves stability. Security. She's a smart girl but she's also..." He paused, searching for the word. "Naive. She sees the best in people. Sometimes doesn't see the

warning signs."

The implication was clear. *I'm watching you. Don't think you can fool me just because you've charmed my daughter.*

"I understand completely, sir. And I appreciate you looking out for her. That's what a good father does."

They talked for another ten minutes. Sports. Politics. The state of the broadcasting industry. Mr. Holloway asked intelligent questions, clearly testing whether Vox actually knew what he claimed to know.

Vox passed. He always passed these tests. He'd spent decades learning how to mirror people, how to reflect back exactly what they wanted to see.

Mrs. Holloway called them for lunch.

The dining room table was set with actual china. Cloth napkins. Multiple forks. The kind of formal Sunday meal that people of this class still maintained even as the rest of the world moved toward more casual dining.

The food arrived in stages. Roast beef. Potatoes. Vegetables that had been cooked until they were soft enough to cut with a fork. Everything well prepared and aggressively traditional.

Vox complimented every dish. Praised Mrs. Holloway's cooking. Listened attentively to Mr. Holloway's stories about his own career in insurance.

Margaret glowed throughout the meal, clearly thrilled that her parents and her boyfriend were getting along so well.

During a lull in conversation, while Mr. Holloway was carving another slice of roast beef with the intense focus of a surgeon, Vox let his gaze drift across the living room.

It was a museum of respectable, middle class life. The mantelpiece above the fireplace was crowded with evidence of it. Framed photographs stood in neat rows: Margaret as a gap toothed child, a stern looking man in a military uniform who was probably a grandfather, a family portrait from a few years ago where everyone's smile looked slightly forced.

Next to the photos sat a small, mother of pearl jewelry box, its lid slightly ajar. A porcelain vase held a bouquet of dried flowers, their colors faded to muted shades of brown and pink. And nestled between the vase and a stack of leather bound books, sat a small deer figurine.

It was porcelain. Delicate. Probably expensive. Its painted eyes were wide and black, and its head was tilted at an angle that suggested alertness, one ear perked forward as if listening for a distant sound.

The sight of it triggered an immediate, visceral thought.

I need to finish that project document before Monday.

The thought arrived fully formed, intrusive, completely inappropriate for the current situation. But once it arrived, it expanded. He needed to refine the power supply specifications. Needed to start identifying the second engineer for the transmitter component. Needed to draft that progress report for Alastor.

And suddenly, unbidden, his brain conjured an image of Alastor sitting at this table. In the seat Vox currently occupied. Smiling that unsettling smile at Mrs. Holloway while she asked him about his job. Making small talk with Mr. Holloway about the bourbon.

The image was absurd. Horrifying. Alastor would never be here. Would never subject himself to this kind of domestic performance. And if he did, the Holloways would probably sense something wrong immediately. That smile was too predatory for a setting this aggressively normal.

Vox shook his head slightly, trying to dislodge the image. Focused on his plate. Took another bite of pot roast that had been cooked for so long it had achieved the texture of leather.

"Vincent? Are you alright, dear?"

Mrs. Holloway was looking at him with concern.

"Yes, sorry." He smiled apologetically. "Just thinking about work. Technical problem I need to solve. My mind wandered for a moment."

"You work too hard," Mrs. Holloway said, but her eyes were sharp. Testing. "Do you get enough sleep? You look a bit tired."

"I sleep fine, ma'am. Just passionate about my work."

"Passion is good," Mr. Holloway interjected. "But a man needs balance. Work, family, rest. All in proper proportion."

"Yes, sir. Absolutely."

The meal continued. Dessert arrived. Apple pie with ice cream. Mrs. Holloway had made it herself. Vox complimented it effusively, though it was slightly too sweet and the crust was overdone.

By the time they finished, it was nearly three in the afternoon. Vox had been performing for hours. His face hurt from smiling. His jaw ached from maintaining the perfect expression of engaged interest.

Finally, mercifully, the meal ended.

Mr. Holloway shook his hand again. "Good to meet you, Vincent. I'm sure we'll be seeing more of you."

Mrs. Holloway hugged him, which he hadn't expected. The physical contact felt wrong, like being embraced by a predator disguised as prey. "You're welcome anytime, dear. And Vincent? Take care of our girl."

"I will, ma'am. I promise."

Margaret walked him to the door. The afternoon sun was streaming through the windows, making everything look warm and domestic and suffocating.

"They loved you!" Margaret's voice was almost a squeal. "My mother said you have kind eyes. She never says that about anyone."

"Your family is wonderful," Vox said, and the lie came so smoothly he almost believed it himself. "Thank you for including me."

Margaret stepped closer. Went up on her toes. Kissed his cheek, soft and chaste and sweet.

The contact was like an electric shock. Wrong frequency. Wrong voltage. Everything about it made his skin crawl.

He recovered quickly. Smiled warmly. Squeezed her hand.

"I'll see you tomorrow at work."

"Tomorrow," she agreed, practically glowing.

He walked down the front steps, down the path, out to the sidewalk. Maintained his posture, his measured pace, his expression of contentment until he turned the corner.

The moment he was out of sight, he wiped his cheek on his sleeve. Scrubbed hard, like he could remove not just the physical sensation but the entire interaction.

His other hand went to his collar, loosening his tie. The air suddenly felt easier to breathe.

He walked home through the quiet Sunday streets, past families returning from their own post church activities, past children playing on front lawns, past all the trappings of normal, stable, suffocating domesticity.

A cold wave of relief crashed over him as he walked. Relief mixed with something else. Satisfaction, maybe. Or vindication.

He was glad he hadn't killed her.

She lived with her parents. In that house, in that neighborhood, with those watchful neighbors and that mother who noticed *everything*. If Margaret had gone missing, they would have noticed within hours. Would have called the police immediately. Would have provided detailed descriptions, recent photos, a complete timeline of her last known movements.

And Vox, the new boyfriend who'd just started seeing her, who'd been spending so much time with her at work, would have been suspect number one.

The divine intervention in the alley hadn't just stopped him from committing murder. It had stopped him from committing an incredibly stupid murder that would have destroyed everything.

This way was better. Cleaner. Margaret was useful alive. Her parents were a complication, sure, but a manageable one.

And when he eventually moved on, when this whole performance outlived its usefulness, he could end it gracefully. A mutual decision. Still friends. No drama. No suspicious deaths.

He reached his apartment building as the sun was starting to set. Climbed the stairs slowly, each step feeling heavier than the last.

Inside, the apartment was dark and quiet. The guppy swam its circle. The room smelled like stale air.

Vox dropped his coat on the armchair. Loosened his tie completely. Stood in the center of the room.

"One step closer," he said to the empty apartment. To the guppy. To himself.

But God, the overhead on this project was brutal.

The domesticity. The performance. The hours spent smiling and nodding and pretending to care about pot roast and insurance careers and family traditions.

In Hell, alliances were simple. Power based. You didn't need to meet anyone's parents. Didn't need to sit through church services or pretend to have kind eyes.

You just made a deal, shook hands or signed in blood, and got on with business.

This life required so much more theater. So many more moving parts. So many more places where the mask could slip and reveal what was underneath.

Vox walked to his desk. Pulled out the project documents. The schematics. The progress report he'd drafted yesterday.

Work. He could focus on work. That was real. That was concrete. That had nothing to do with pot roast or heterochromia or mothers who noticed when you looked tired.

He had an engineer, a plan and momentum.

Everything else was just overhead. The cost of doing business in a world where you couldn't just kill your problems.

He sat down and started refining the transmitter specifications.

The guppy swam its circle.

Outside, the city settled into evening.

And Vox kept working, because work was the only thing that made sense anymore.

Chapter 25

Vox stared at the ceiling.

The water stains had multiplied. Or maybe he was just noticing new ones. That one near the corner looked like a map of Italy. The larger one near the light fixture resembled a deformed hand reaching toward nothing.

He should get up. It was Monday morning. He had work. Responsibilities. Projects to manage.

He didn't move.

The apartment was cold. The radiator had given up sometime during the night with its usual banging protest, a series of metallic clanks that had probably woken half the building. His breath misted slightly in the air. The guppy was probably fine. Fish didn't care about temperature the way humans did. But Vox found himself vaguely concerned about it anyway, which was its own kind of disturbing.

When had he started caring about a fish's welfare?

He kept staring at the ceiling.

The problem was that he had nothing to do.

Not nothing. He had plenty of things he should be doing. But none of them were things he could actually do right now, in this moment, with his own hands. He was waiting on everyone for everything.

Waiting for Margaret to hear back from her RCA contact about promising engineers. She'd promised to make calls this week, had been enthusiastic about it, eyes bright with the desire to be helpful. But that still meant waiting for her schedule to align with Bill's schedule to align with whatever engineers Bill thought might be worth recruiting. Three layers of separation between Vox and actual progress.

Waiting for David to call with a progress report on the power supply. They'd agreed on a two week timeline, which meant Vox wouldn't hear anything substantial for at least another week unless something went catastrophically wrong. And even then, he'd only hear about the failure, not be able to fix it himself.

Waiting for Alastor to make contact about next steps. The radio host had said he'd be in touch "early next week" with specifications and budget parameters. Which could mean today or could mean Friday or could mean whenever Alastor felt like it because he was the one in control of this arrangement, the one setting the pace, the one who could ignore Vincent Whittman for days without consequence.

Vox was doing nothing. Contributing nothing. Just sitting here waiting for other people to move the pieces on the board while he watched from the sidelines like some impotent spectator.

He was completely passive.

The realization settled over him like a weight, pressing down on his chest, making it hard to breathe properly.

He swung his legs out of bed, feet hitting the cold floor. The shock of it was grounding. He stood, his joints protesting slightly. Walked to the small bathroom and turned on the water, waiting for it to heat up. The pipes groaned and sputtered. The mirror was spotted with age, the silvering deteriorating around the edges.

This wasn't how it was supposed to feel. He was the one delegating, the one directing operations. The mastermind who orchestrated everything while others did the grunt work, the details, the tedious implementation that was beneath his pay grade.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror. Pale. Tired. Dark circles under his eyes that spoke of too many nights lying awake, mind racing, unable to shut off. The face of someone who hadn't been sleeping well. Who'd been grinding himself down to nothing.

Back in hell, when he'd delegated, he'd been at the top. When he'd sent subordinates to handle tasks, it was because he had better things to do. More important decisions to make. His time was valuable, theirs was not. Delegation was a sign of power, of efficient resource management. It meant you were important enough that other people did your bidding without question.

Now he was delegating because he couldn't do the work himself. Because he didn't have the resources or access or legitimacy. Because he needed other people to accomplish basic tasks he should have been able to handle alone if he'd had any actual power in this timeline.

He wasn't delegating. He was dependent.

The distinction hit him like cold water.

He picked up the soap, working it between his palms until it foamed. He scrubbed slowly, deliberately. The routine was meditative, gave his hands something to do while his mind spun in increasingly dark circles.

And then, the memory surfaced. Sharp and clear and absolutely unwelcome, arriving with the force of a physical blow.

Alastor's voice. That particular tone of amused disdain that made Vox want to put his fist through a wall, through Alastor's smug face.

"You're nothing without them."

They'd been in Vox's office. He remembered that line. Remembered the way Alastor had said it, casual as commenting on the weather. Like he was simply observing an objective fact

rather than twisting the knife.

He himself had responded with something cutting. He couldn't remember what. Something defensive and too loud and exactly the wrong tone to prove he wasn't bothered.

But the words had stuck anyway. Had burrowed under his skin and stayed there, festering like a splinter he couldn't quite dig out.

Because there was truth in them. Uncomfortable, humiliating truth that Vox had spent years trying to ignore or rationalize away.

Vox needed people. Needed engineers to build his technology. Needed employees to run his operations. Needed the infrastructure of society to give him purchase, to give him leverage. Without all that, he was just a clever man with ideas that stayed theoretical. A visionary with no vision board. A strategist with no army to command.

In Hell, he'd had decades to build that infrastructure. To surround himself with competent people who owed him their positions and their loyalty. Who feared him enough to be reliable and needed him enough to be motivated. To create systems so robust they ran themselves, needed minimal oversight, generated their own momentum.

Here, he had nothing. No infrastructure. No employees. No power base. Just Vincent Whittman, meteorologist, trying desperately to claw his way up from nothing with nothing but his intelligence and his memories of a future that wouldn't happen for decades.

And he was doing it by waiting for other people to act. By hoping Margaret would make the right calls. By trusting David wouldn't screw up the power supply. By dancing to Alastor's tune whenever the radio host decided to pay attention to him.

The nausea hit suddenly. He gripped the edge of the sink, knuckles going white. This was weak. This was pathetic. He was being pathetic.

Alastor's words echoed in his head, louder now, unavoidable.

He splashed cold water on his face. The shock of it helped, grounded him back in his body instead of his spiraling thoughts.

He stared at his reflection. Water dripped from his chin onto the porcelain sink, each drop loud in the quiet bathroom.

He needed to do something. Not delegate something. Not wait for something. Actually do something himself. Something that would demonstrate his value, his competence, his potential to the people around him. Something that would prove, to himself if no one else, that he was more than just a passive coordinator of other people's work.

Something that would make Alastor's words feel less true.

He toweled off his face. Walked back into the living room. Started getting dressed, pulling on his work clothes with mechanical efficiency.

He needed to act. Needed to plant seeds. Needed to start shaping how people saw him instead of just accepting whatever role they'd assigned him in their mental organizational charts.

Starting today.

By the time he left his apartment, the plan was already forming. Vague still, more direction than detail, but concrete enough to feel like action.

He was done being passive.

- - -

The station's cafeteria was a generous term for what was essentially a large closet with tables shoved into it.

The walls were the same institutional green as the rest of the building, that particular shade that was supposed to be calming but just ended up being depressing. The floor was linoleum that had been white once but was now the color of old newspapers, scuffed and stained from years of foot traffic and spilled coffee. The fluorescent lights hummed with that particular frequency that gave people headaches after prolonged exposure.

But it was warm, at least. And it sold sandwiches that were edible if not good. And it gave people a place to congregate during lunch instead of eating at their desks like animals, hunched over their work with crumbs falling into their typewriters.

Vox sat at one of the long tables, picking at a tuna salad sandwich that tasted primarily of mayonnaise. Around him, the usual lunch crowd had gathered, their voices overlapping into a general din of office gossip and casual complaints.

Margaret sat to his right, chatting animatedly with Susan from accounting. Something about a sale, the two of them discussing prices with the focus most people reserved for international politics. Across from him, two producers were arguing about whether the afternoon programming schedule needed revision, their voices getting progressively louder as each refused to concede the other's points. Further down, some of the sales team were laughing about something that probably wasn't as funny as they thought it was, their guffaws echoing off the walls.

Vox was still in his sour mood from this morning. He participated in the conversation only minimally, offering nods and occasional murmurs of agreement when someone looked at him expectantly. His sandwich sat half eaten on its paper wrapper, the bread getting soggy.

He was brooding. Planning. Calculating. Running through scenarios and possibilities while maintaining just enough engagement to not seem rude.

"So Margaret," one of the producers said, a man named Paul who had the kind of earnest enthusiasm that made Vox's teeth ache. Too genuine. Too optimistic. The kind of person who probably whistled while he worked. "What's next for you? After this Miller deal, you've got to be up for a promotion, right?"

Margaret laughed, that practiced sound that was supposed to seem modest but carried an undercurrent of genuine pride. She'd been waiting for someone to ask this question. "Oh, I don't know about that. I'm just happy the client was satisfied. It's not about me, it's about delivering results for the station."

The false modesty was almost professional grade. Vox would have been impressed if he hadn't been using the same techniques for decades.

"Come on," Susan interjected, leaning forward with that conspiratorial energy people got when discussing promotions that weren't their own. "Sterling was practically singing your praises last week. I heard him telling Brennan you were 'essential personnel.' Those were his exact words."

Margaret's cheeks flushed slightly. "Well, I had a lot of help. Vincent did most of the actual research work. I couldn't have done it without him. If I deserve a promotion, so does he."

Several people glanced at Vox. He was still picking at his sandwich, apparently not paying attention to the conversation. His expression was neutral, slightly distant, like his mind was elsewhere.

But his mind was very much here. Every word was being processed, analyzed, filed away. The social dynamics of the table mapping themselves in his head like a three dimensional chess board.

This was an opportunity. A perfect setup, handed to him without even needing to manufacture it.

He set down his sandwich. Sighed. The sound was theatrical, just loud enough to be noticed but quiet enough to seem unintentional. Like something that had slipped out despite his best efforts to keep his thoughts private.

"I'm just happy drawing my clouds," he said, his tone carrying carefully calibrated wistfulness. Not bitter or resentful. Just resigned. The tone of someone who'd accepted their lot but couldn't help wishing for more. "But a man can dream, can't he?"

The table went quiet. The shift was immediate and noticeable. The producers stopped their argument. The sales team's laughter died. Even Margaret and Susan's dress discussion trailed off mid sentence.

People looked at him with curious expressions. Some confused. Some intrigued. All suddenly paying attention.

"Dream about what?" Paul asked, his head tilting like a curious dog.

Vox smiled, self deprecating and slightly sad. The expression of someone who'd just revealed more than they intended and was now embarrassed about it. "Oh, nothing important. It's silly, really. Forget I said anything."

"No, come on." Margaret touched his arm, her fingers warm through his shirt sleeve. "What are you talking about?"

He paused, as if deciding whether to share. Let the moment stretch just long enough to build anticipation, to make people lean in slightly, waiting for the revelation.

"It's just..." He looked down at his sandwich, then back up. "Sometimes I think about what it would be like to be a proper news anchor. You know, delivering actual news instead of just pointing at pressure systems and telling people to bring umbrellas."

He laughed softly, the sound carrying a hint of self mockery. "But that's Chuck's territory. He's very experienced. Very good at what he does. Been doing it for what, fifteen years? I'm sure I'd have a lot to learn to reach his proficiency."

The performance was perfect. Modest without being obsequious. Ambitious without being aggressive. Self aware enough to recognize the obstacles without being defeatist. The tone of someone who had dreams but knew his place, who understood the hierarchy and wasn't trying to upset it, just... wishing things could be different.

Margaret's expression shifted immediately. Her eyes lit up with that particular combination of affection and advocacy. She turned in her seat to face him more fully.

"A news anchor?" Her voice rose slightly, carrying across the table. "Vincent, you'd be amazing at that! You're on air all the time for the weather anyway. How much harder could it be?"

"Well, it's very different," Vox said, his tone still doubtful. He picked up his sandwich, then set it back down without taking a bite. Nervous energy. "The weather is just reading data and pointing at maps. It's formulaic. Actual news requires gravitas. Presence. The ability to command authority while still being approachable. Chuck has that. He's a professional. I'm not sure I do."

"Are you kidding?" Margaret turned to the rest of the table, her advocacy mode fully engaged now. Her voice got louder, more insistent. "You guys have no idea how smart he is. The way he handles the Miller Brothers, explaining complex data analysis so clearly that even non technical people understand it immediately. The way he presents the weather segments with actual personality instead of just droning through numbers. He'd be incredible as an anchor."

Paul was nodding, his expression thoughtful. "You know, she's got a point, Whittman. You've got the voice for it. Pleasant, clear, authoritative but not intimidating. That's gold for broadcasting."

"And you're already comfortable on camera," one of the producers added. "You don't get nervous, you don't freeze up. Half the battle is just being able to perform under pressure."

Susan leaned forward, her expression appraising. "And you're easy on the eyes. That matters for television, let's be honest. No offense to Chuck, but he looks like someone's uncle who fell asleep in the sun too long."

Laughter erupted around the table. Not cruel laughter, just the honest acknowledgment of an obvious truth. Chuck was competent but not attractive. Capable but not charismatic. The kind of anchor who did his job adequately without ever being memorable.

Vox maintained his modest smile, but internally he was cataloging every response. The nods of agreement. The way people were looking at him with fresh assessment, recalibrating their mental image of Vincent Whittman to include this new dimension. The way the conversation had shifted to make him the center, everyone suddenly invested in this hypothetical scenario.

"I don't know," he said again, still playing doubtful. He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture of uncertainty. "It's probably just a fantasy. Chuck's not going anywhere anytime soon. And even if something did open up, there are probably a dozen people more qualified than me waiting for their shot."

"Well, you never know what might happen," Margaret said, squeezing his hand under the table. Her grip was warm, firm, reassuring. "Opportunities come up when you least expect them. And when they do, you should be ready. You should be the obvious choice, the person everyone thinks of first."

"She's right," Paul said. "In this business, it's not just about being qualified. It's about being visible. About making sure people know what you're capable of."

The conversation started to move on, other topics creeping back in. Someone mentioned the upcoming station anniversary party. Whether anyone had seen the new Hitchcock film that everyone was talking about. The usual office minutiae that filled lunch hours in workplaces everywhere.

But the seed had been planted. Deep and firm and exactly where Vox had wanted it.

In this small section of the station's social network, Vincent Whittman was now associated with aspiring anchor. The idea had been introduced, had been validated by multiple people, had been allowed to settle into the collective consciousness like sediment drifting to the bottom of a pond.

When an opportunity eventually presented itself, and Vox would make sure one did, people would remember this conversation. Would think "oh right, Whittman wanted to do that." Would see his ambition as something reasonable and expected rather than presumptuous or grasping. Would view his advancement as natural, deserved, the logical next step rather than some shocking power grab.

Vox finished his terrible sandwich and stood to clear his tray. The bread had gone completely soggy now, falling apart as he picked up the wrapper. He dumped it in the trash bin near the door, stacked his tray on the return cart.

As he walked away from the table, he allowed himself a small, private smile.

That was how you planted seeds. Letting other people advocate for you instead of advocating for yourself. Making your ambition seem like something other people had noticed and encouraged rather than something you were aggressively pursuing. People trusted peer recommendations more than self promotion. It was basic psychology.

Margaret would tell other people about this conversation. Would mention casually to colleagues over the next few days that Vincent was interested in news anchoring, that he'd be really good at it, that someone should give him a chance. And those people would tell other people, the information spreading through the station's social network like a virus, invisible and effective and completely organic seeming.

The rest of the afternoon passed in the usual grind of weather maps and pressure systems. Vox prepared his evening broadcast segment, standing in front of the camera for his allotted ninety seconds to point at the pressure fronts moving in from the Great Lakes. Delivered it with his usual professional competence, the performance so routine now he could do it without thinking.

He returned to his desk to finish paperwork. Updates to the five day forecast. Requisition forms for new weather balloons. The tedious administrative work that nobody saw but that kept the department running.

But part of his mind was elsewhere.

At four thirty, Sterling's assistant appeared at his desk. A nervous young woman whose name Vox kept forgetting despite working with her for weeks.

"Mr. Whittman? Mr. Sterling needs the updated isobar charts for the evening broadcast. Chuck needs them integrated into his segment."

"Of course." Vox pulled them from his filing system, the charts he'd updated that morning showing the pressure systems with crystal clarity. "I'll bring them down myself."

He carried the charts down the hallway, past the bustle of the newsroom entering its pre broadcast frenzy. The energy shifted in the hours before air time, everything getting tighter, more focused. Producers were shouting across desks. Phones were ringing constantly, the sound overlapping into a constant trill. Someone was having an argument about advertisement placement near the water cooler, their voices getting progressively more heated with each exchange.

Vox pushed through the door to the control booth.

The space was cramped and intensely technical. Racks of equipment lined one wall, vacuum tubes glowing amber behind metal grilles, their light casting strange shadows. The audio board dominated the center of the room, a complex landscape of sliders and knobs and patch cables, each one labeled in fading pen. Through the large window, the studio was visible. Cameras on wheeled dollies, their cables taped to the floor in careful paths. The anchor desk with its neat stack of papers and the little lamp that made everything look warm and intimate on screen. The weather map board where Vox would stand in approximately ninety minutes, pointer in hand, explaining atmospheric conditions to people eating dinner.

Two engineers were working on something, heads bent over the audio board in intense concentration. Chuck was visible in the studio beyond the glass, rehearsing his opening. Vox could hear his voice through the monitor speaker, slightly tinny but clear.

"Good evening, I'm Charles Hammond with your evening news. Tonight's top story..."

Vox set the charts down on the designated table, a metal surface covered in tape marks and coffee rings. One of the engineers, Jerry, glanced over. He was young, maybe thirty, with the perpetual squint of someone who spent too much time staring at equipment meters.

"Thanks, Whittman. We'll get those loaded in for the weather segment."

"No problem." Vox started to leave, hand already on the door handle.

Then paused. Turned back, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

"Actually, Jerry, mind if I take a quick look at the setup?" He gestured vaguely toward the equipment, a sheepish smile tugging at his lips. “It's not like I get to see this place too often. It’s… well, I’ve got to say, it’s really something. Quite the setup."

Jerry shrugged, not even looking up from the audio board. "Sure. Just don't touch anything. We're going live in ninety minutes and I don't want to recalibrate everything because someone bumped a slider."

"Of course. Just looking. Hands off, I promise."

Vox moved to the equipment rack. The engineers returned their attention to the audio board, discussing levels and balance in that technical shorthand engineers used when they thought nobody else was listening.

He studied the setup with genuine interest. It was primitive compared to what he was used to, vacuum tubes instead of solid state transistors, analog instead of digital. But the fundamentals were the same, unchanged across decades. Signal path from microphone to pre amplifier to mixing board to transmitter. Each stage carefully calibrated to maintain quality without introducing noise or distortion, the signal staying clean through the entire chain.

Chuck's microphone feed ran through a dedicated pre amp, a glass and metal box mounted in the rack at eye level. Inside, visible through the ventilation grilles, a vacuum tube glowed

steadily. It was the standard model for broadcast work in this era. Robust, reliable, nearly impossible to damage under normal operation. The industry standard for a reason.

But also easy to sabotage if you knew what you were doing. If you understood exactly how the connections worked, how much force was needed to compromise them without making it obvious.

Not knowledge a weatherman was supposed to have.

Vox's hand moved almost unconsciously, drawn toward the rack like it was magnetized. His rational brain was screaming at him to stop, to walk away, to not do what he was clearly about to do.

But his body wasn't listening to his rational brain. His body was listening to the part of him that was tired of being passive. Tired of waiting. Tired of being harmless, helpful Vincent Whittman while everyone else made the decisions and took the actions and moved the pieces.

He reached into the rack, his fingers finding the tube's base through the grille. The metal was warm from the electrical current running through it, almost hot enough to be uncomfortable. The engineers were still focused on the mixing board, their backs to him. Chuck was still rehearsing in the studio, oblivious, running through his lines with professional precision.

One slight twist. That's all it would take. Just enough to break the connection between the tube's pins and the socket. Not remove it entirely, that would be too obvious. Just loosen it. The connection would hold under normal circumstances but would fail under any kind of stress or vibration, under the electrical load of an actual broadcast.

It would look like equipment failure. A tube that had worked itself loose through normal heating and cooling cycles, expanding and contracting with temperature changes. The kind of thing that happened all the time in broadcast facilities. A maintenance issue, not sabotage. An unlucky coincidence, nothing more.

His fingers were on the tube. The metal was warm, almost hot against his skin.

This was stupid. The kind of impulsive act that could backfire spectacularly.

But he was so tired of being passive. So tired of waiting for permission. So tired of watching everyone else move forward while he stood still.

He twisted the tube. Just slightly. A fraction of a rotation. Imperceptible unless you were looking directly at it, and even then you'd have to know exactly what you were looking for.

Then he pulled his hand back, sliding it smoothly out of the rack. His movements were casual, unhurried. Just someone who'd finished looking at something interesting.

"This is a really interesting setup," he said to Jerry, his voice carrying just the right note of impressed curiosity.

"Yeah, we try to keep it organized." Jerry still didn't look up, his attention locked on the meters in front of him. "Makes troubleshooting easier when something inevitably breaks. And something always breaks eventually. That's broadcast for you."

"Smart approach. Well, thanks for letting me take a look. I'll get out of your hair. I know you guys are busy before air time."

"No problem. See you later for your segment."

Vox left the control booth, walking back toward his desk with measured, unhurried steps. His heart was racing but his breathing was controlled.

Behind him, the engineers continued their work. Chuck continued his rehearsal, his voice carrying through the monitor speakers. Everything proceeded normally, the usual pre broadcast routine playing out exactly as it always did.

Vox sat at his desk and picked up a weather report, pretending to study the data while his mind raced through possibilities and contingencies.

What he'd just done was insane. Actively sabotaging a live broadcast. If caught, he'd be fired immediately, probably blacklisted from the entire broadcasting industry. His career would be over before it even started. Vincent Whittman would be remembered as the weatherman who deliberately tanked a live news broadcast, and that would be the end of everything.

But he wouldn't be caught. The tube would fail during broadcast, the engineers would panic, and in the chaos of trying to fix it, they'd reseat the connection without ever questioning how it had come loose in the first place. These things failed all the time. Everyone knew that. Vacuum tubes were temperamental, sensitive to heat and vibration. This was just bad luck, unfortunate timing, one of those things that happened in live television.

Bad luck. And an opportunity for someone prepared to seize it when it presented itself.

Vox glanced at the clock on the wall. Five forty five. Fifteen minutes until broadcast.

He should probably position himself strategically. Close enough to help when needed, to be available when the crisis hit, but not so close it seemed suspicious. Not hovering. Not obviously waiting for something to go wrong.

Just nearby. Coincidentally.

He stood, gathering some papers as an excuse. Weather data that he could plausibly need to discuss with the control booth. A legitimate reason to be in the area when everything went to hell.

He walked toward the control booth, his pace measured and casual.

The hallway outside was busy with the usual pre broadcast activity. Production assistants rushing back and forth with scripts and props. Someone from makeup touching up Chuck's

foundation, the powder visible in the harsh hallway light. A camera operator adjusting his equipment, checking angles and sight lines. The chaos of television production, everyone moving with purpose toward the same deadline.

Through the control booth window, Vox could see the engineers doing final checks. The audio board's meters bounced and settled as they tested levels, confirming everything was nominal. Jerry was making notes on a pad, probably logging the settings for post broadcast review. Everything looked perfect. Professional. Ready.

The clock on the wall clicked to five fifty eight. Two minutes.

The production assistant with the clipboard was counting down now, his voice carrying through the hallway. "Two minutes to air! Two minutes!"

People moved faster. Last minute adjustments. Final confirmations. The energy ramped up, that particular pre show tension where everyone was focused and alert and ready.

The "On Air" light above the control booth door turned red, casting a crimson glow across the hallway.

Showtime.

Vox leaned against the wall, papers in hand, looking like he was just reviewing something while waiting for his own segment later. Just another employee in the general vicinity doing his job.

Through the window, he watched the broadcast begin.

Chapter 26

Chuck's opening was smooth as silk. Professional. Exactly what one would expect from someone who'd been doing this for fifteen years.

"Good evening." His voice carried authority and warmth in equal measure, the practiced cadence of a man who'd delivered a thousand broadcasts. "I'm Charles Hammond with your evening news. Tonight's top story: the city council voted today on the proposed budget increase for municipal services..."

Vox stood in the hallway, watching through the window. The glass was cool against his fingertips where he'd unconsciously pressed his hand to the pane. His expression was one of polite interest, just another employee observing the broadcast with mild curiosity. Nothing in his posture suggested he was waiting for something specific. Nothing in his face revealed that his heart was hammering against his ribs like it was trying to escape, that every muscle in his body was coiled with anticipation, that he'd been standing here watching the clock tick down to this precise moment.

The pre-amp tube he'd loosened should be failing right about now.

Inside the booth, the engineers monitored their equipment with practiced attention. Everything seemed normal. Jerry was watching the audio board with the focus of a hawk, his eyes tracking across the meters as they bounced with Chuck's voice. The needles swung in their familiar dance, green to yellow, never quite reaching red. Perfect levels. Professional.

Chuck continued, hitting his marks perfectly. His hands moved in small, unconscious gestures as he spoke, the body language of an experienced broadcaster making the content feel conversational. "The proposed budget, which would increase spending by approximately twelve percent over the previous fiscal year, passed with a narrow margin of-"

The microphone cut out.

It was instant. No fade, no static, no warning. One moment Chuck was speaking, his voice clear and authoritative. The next moment, silence. Dead air. The last thing anyone wanted to happen during a live broadcast.

Vox felt his pulse spike with a thrill he had to work very hard not to show on his face.

Chuck's mouth kept moving. His expression shifted from confident to confused in the space of a heartbeat, his eyes widening slightly. He glanced down at his microphone, then up toward the control booth with an expression that was half question, half panic. His hand came up reflexively, touching the mic as if physical contact could diagnose the problem.

Inside the booth, chaos erupted.

"What the hell?" Jerry lunged for the audio board, his chair slamming into the console with a metallic bang. His hands flew across the controls, flipping switches, adjusting levels. "We lost his mic! Where's the signal?"

The second engineer was already scrambling toward the equipment rack, his coffee mug forgotten, sloshing dark liquid onto the mixing board. "Checking the patch bay!"

"Check the pre-amp!" Jerry's voice was climbing toward genuine panic, that edge of desperation that came from knowing thousands of viewers had noticed the technical difficulties. "We've got dead air!"

The microphone came back for a split second, just long enough for hope to flare in the booth, but instead of Chuck's voice, a high-pitched squeal of feedback erupted from the monitor speakers. It was a jagged, piercing sound that made everyone in the booth flinch violently, hands flying to their ears.

"God dammit!" The second engineer was practically diving into the equipment rack, his body half disappeared behind the tangle of cables and glowing tubes. "Wait! Wait, I found it! The pre-amp tube worked itself loose!"

"Again?" Jerry barked, his face flushed red with stress.

"It's the heat! These old sockets expand and the vibration just walks them right out." There was a metallic clink as the engineer shoved the tube back into place. "Seated! Try it now!"

Jerry flipped the microphone back on, his hand shaking slightly. "Chuck? Can you hear me? Test your mic."

In the studio, Chuck looked toward the booth with desperate hope, his shoulders hunched with tension. "Testing. One, two, three. Can you hear me?"

His voice came through clean and clear.

"Thank Christ." Jerry slumped in his chair, his hand coming up to wipe sweat from his forehead. "We're back. Okay. Chuck, pick up where you left off. You're good. You're live."

But Vox could see through the window that something was wrong.

Chuck's hands were shaking. Not just a slight tremor. They were trembling violently enough to be visible from across the room, the papers in his grip rustling audibly through the studio mic. His face was flushed beyond embarrassment, approaching the purple of genuine distress, mottled and blotchy. His collar was dark with sweat, a spreading stain that crept down toward his tie. He shuffled through his papers but his hands were trembling too much to hold them steady, the sheets sliding against each other, threatening to spill on the floor at any moment.

Vox watched the whole thing with detached interest. This was what happened when you broke someone's confidence at the worst possible moment. This was what fifteen years of routine looked like when the routine suddenly shattered.

Chuck started speaking, and his voice cracked immediately, the sound painful to hear. "The city council... that is, the proposed budget for..."

The sentence died. He cleared his throat, the sound harsh and wet through the speakers. Tried again, his eyes desperately scanning the script.

"The budget proposal was... the vote was..."

He'd completely lost his place. The script was right there, the words were literally in front of him, but he couldn't focus on it, couldn't make his eyes track the lines. The confidence that had carried him through fifteen years of broadcasts had evaporated in the space of thirty seconds. His finger traced across the page, searching for his place, but the trembling made it impossible.

In the control booth, Jerry leaned forward, as if proximity to the glass could somehow help. "Come on, Chuck. You got this. Just read the line."

But Chuck was panicking. Vox could see it happening in real time. The panic was feeding on itself, each failed attempt making the next one harder, the spiral tightening with every second of dead air.

"Cut his mic." Sterling's voice came from behind Vox, sharp and commanding.

Vox didn't turn. Didn't react. Just kept his expression neutral, concerned, appropriate for the situation.

Sterling had materialized in the doorway, his presence filling the cramped space. His face was that dangerous shade of crimson that spoke of high blood pressure and higher anger. His shirt was wrinkled, his tie askew. He'd seemingly been in his office when the chaos started, probably halfway through his third drink of the evening.

"Cut it now," Sterling yelled, his voice carrying that particular authority that came from years of making people jump when he spoke. "He's making a fool of himself out there."

Jerry reached for the audio board, his hand hesitating for just a moment before he killed the feed. Chuck's microphone went dead again, the red light on his camera winking out.

In the studio, Chuck looked up at the booth with visible relief. He sagged in his chair like a puppet with cut strings, one hand coming up to loosen his tie. His chest heaved with deep breaths, as if he had just escaped drowning.

"Goddammit." Sterling was scanning the control booth now, his eyes wild, desperate. "Who can read the next segment?"

The room erupted into chaos again, but a different kind now. Not the panic of technical failure but the scrambling desperation of needing to fill airtime, of knowing that every second of dead air was costing the station viewers and credibility.

"What about Davis?" someone suggested, their voice cutting through the noise.

"Davis is out sick," Jerry said, not looking away from his board. "Has been all week. The flu."

"Harry then?"

"Not on site. Won't be here for another hour at least. He's covering that thing in the east end."

Sterling's jaw was working, his teeth grinding audibly. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, the knuckles white with pressure. Vox could practically see him calculating, running through options, discarding them one by one.

"Hey." One of the sound technicians spoke up, young guy whose name Vox had never bothered to learn. "How about the weatherman?"

The room went quiet for a fraction of a second as Sterling's eyes fixed on Vox.

"Him?" Sterling's voice carried layers of skepticism, doubt, and barely-concealed desperation. "Was Chuck's *performance* not humiliating enough for the station?"

Something inside Vox snapped.

It wasn't a decision or a choice. It was more like a dam breaking, like something that had been held back under enormous pressure suddenly finding a crack and exploding through.

The exhaustion from weeks of playing Vincent Whittman. The humiliation of being invisible, of being talked over, of having his reports cut short for commercial breaks. The frustration of watching incompetent people fail and still climb the ladder while he grovelled for scraps. All of it came flooding to the surface at once, hot and immediate and completely beyond his control.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Vox's voice came out sharp, cutting through the chaos of the control booth. Every head in the room turned. "Are you doubting my competence while we're hemorrhaging viewers by the second?"

Sterling's eyebrows shot up, his expression shifting from desperate to incredulous. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Vox stepped fully into the booth, his body language shifting from deferential to confrontational in an instant. The Vincent mask had shattered entirely, revealing something much sharper underneath. "I've been on camera every single day for months. I've never frozen. I've never fumbled. I've never needed my hand held like Chuck just did out there. And you're doubting *my* competence?"

The room went dead silent. The only sound was the hum of equipment and someone's sharp intake of breath. Everyone stopped what they were doing, turning to stare at this unexpected confrontation.

"Watch your tone, Whittman."

"There's no time for tone, Sterling, your broadcast is dying." Vox took another step forward. "You can fire me tomorrow, but right now, I'm the only one here who isn't panicking. Are you going to let your ego cost the station its reputation?"

"You little..." Sterling's hands were clenched into fists at his sides now. His whole body was rigid with barely controlled rage, vibrating with it.

"I'm not little." Vox's voice dropped, his own irritation barely contained. "And I'm not asking for a favor. I'm offering you a solution. So either put me in that chair, or start preparing your explanation for the board as to why your prime time news broadcast tonight consisted of ten seconds of feedback and a grown man on the verge of tears."

For a moment, Vox thought Sterling might actually take a swing at him.

Then Sterling moved forward suddenly, closing the distance between them in two quick steps. His hand shot out and grabbed Vox by the collar, twisting the fabric tight against his throat. They were face to face now, close enough that Vox could see the broken capillaries in Sterling's nose, could smell the coffee and cigar smoke on his breath, could feel the heat radiating off him.

"You don't talk to me like that," Sterling was practically yelling now. "I don't care how good you think you are. You're a goddamn weatherman. I can make sure you never work in this industry again. Do you understand me?"

Vox met his gaze steadily, not backing down even an inch. His collar was twisted tight enough to restrict his breathing, but he didn't flinch. Just stared back with an intensity that was completely wrong for Vincent Whittman, completely inappropriate for someone in his position.

He could feel his pulse pounding in his throat, pressed against Sterling's knuckles. Could feel the eyes of everyone in the booth on them. Could feel the moment balanced on a knife's edge.

And he smiled. Just slightly. Just enough to let Sterling know he wasn't afraid.

"Mr. Sterling!" Jerry's voice cut through the tension like a lifeline. The engineer was standing now, one hand raised, his face pale. "Sir, we need someone on camera *right now*. We've got maybe thirty seconds before we start losing sponsors."

For a long moment, Sterling didn't move. Just kept his hand twisted in Vox's collar, kept that furious eye contact, his breath coming hard through his nose.

Then he shoved Vox backward, releasing him with enough force to make him stumble slightly, his shoulder hitting the edge of the mixing board.

"Fine." The word came out like a curse, spat between clenched teeth. "Get out there. Read the damn copy. And when this is over, you're in my office first thing tomorrow morning. We're going to have a conversation that you will not enjoy."

He turned to face Jerry, his back to Vox now, dismissing him. "Get him set up. Now."

Vox straightened his collar, his hands steady despite the adrenaline flooding his system, despite the way his heart was trying to hammer its way out of his chest. He could feel the eyes of every person in the booth tracking him.

He glanced toward the doorway and saw Margaret standing there, half-hidden behind the door. Her face was pale, her eyes wide with something that looked like fear, like she was seeing a stranger wearing Vincent's face. She'd witnessed the whole thing. Had seen him transform into someone she didn't recognize.

He looked away from her, focusing back on the task at hand. There would be time to deal with her later.

A production assistant materialized at his elbow, shoving papers into his hands. The news copy for the next portion of the broadcast, still warm from the mimeograph machine, the ink

slightly smudged at the edges.

Vox took them without a word.

He walked into the studio, his footsteps echoing on the linoleum. The space was brightly lit, almost painfully so after the dimmer hallway, the heat from the lights hitting him like a physical wall. He could feel sweat starting immediately at his hairline, his temples.

Chuck was being ushered out by another assistant, the anchor's face a mask of humiliation and relief, his eyes red rimmed. They passed each other at the studio door, close enough to touch.

Chuck didn't make eye contact. Just let himself be guided away from the scene of his failure, his shoulders hunched.

Vox sat down at the anchor desk. The chair was still warm from Chuck's body heat. He arranged the papers in front of him with careful precision, scanning the text quickly. Standard format. Nothing complicated. City council, traffic accident, charity drive. He could do this in his sleep.

Someone positioned a microphone in front of him, adjusting it with practiced efficiency. The camera operator moved into place, framing the shot, making minute adjustments.

Through the control booth window, Vox could see Sterling standing rigid, arms crossed, watching him with barely contained fury. The station manager's face was still flushed, his jaw clenched so tight it looked painful.

Jerry's voice came from the cue speaker, tinny and compressed. "We're going live in ten seconds. Read clean. Ten. Nine. Eight..."

The countdown continued, each number falling like a stone.

Vox took a breath. Let it out slowly. Felt his shoulders settle, felt something in his chest unlock.

This was what he was good at. This was what he'd done for decades in another life. Speaking to cameras, commanding attention, making people listen whether they wanted to or not.

"Three. Two. One."

The camera's red light came on.

Vox looked directly into the lens. As if he could see the people on the other side, the thousands of them sitting in their living rooms, in their kitchens, in their bedrooms. It was like he could see them in his mind's eye, could feel their attention like a physical thing.

He smiled. Not too wide, just enough to seem approachable and trustworthy. The smile of someone who knew exactly what he was doing.

"Good evening." His voice was smooth, confident, authoritative. The voice of someone who'd done this a thousand times before, who could do it a thousand times more without breaking a sweat. "Apologies for the technical difficulties. Let's continue with tonight's news."

He launched into the city council story, but he wasn't reading from the copy word for word like Chuck would have. He was telling a story. Making it interesting. Finding the human element in municipal budget discussions, the drama in numbers and percentages.

"The city council's vote came after three hours of heated debate, with tensions running high as council members argued over priorities. In the end, it was council member Patricia Morrison who provided the deciding vote in favor of the increase. The funds will primarily go toward infrastructure maintenance, including those potholes on Elm Street that have been the bane of morning commuters, and expanding emergency services in the growing northern districts."

The traffic accident. A tragic story, and he let appropriate gravity color his voice without becoming overly sentimental. Just the facts, delivered with the respect the situation deserved, the weight of human loss.

"Emergency responders were on scene within minutes, but tragically, two of the four passengers were pronounced dead at the scene. The identities are being withheld pending notification of family members. Our thoughts are with everyone affected by this tragedy."

A beat. Letting the weight of that settle before moving on.

The charity piece. He shifted his tone here, brightening it slightly. Good news after bad news, the emotional balance that good broadcasts maintained, the rhythm of human experience.

"In more uplifting news, the St. Catherine's Community Foundation has raised over fifteen thousand dollars for the children's hospital expansion project. The funds, gathered through a series of bake sales and community events, will help purchase new equipment for the pediatric ward. Foundation director Martha Smith said the community response has been 'overwhelming and heartening.' If you'd like to contribute, you can visit their downtown office during business hours. Every dollar helps."

Ten minutes of airtime. Ten minutes where he was in complete control, where his decades of experience shone through every word, every pause, every subtle shift in tone.

From somewhere beyond the lights, Vox caught Jerry's voice through the open booth mic, low and incredulous, meant for the room but carrying to the studio. "Holy shit. Where did this come from?"

Sterling's reply followed, quieter. Vox couldn't hear it, but the look of stunned disbelief on his face told him everything.

The camera's red light went dark. The segment was over.

Vox set down the papers with careful precision, each sheet aligned perfectly with the others. Stood smoothly, without rushing, without any visible excitement.

Inside, his heart was still racing. Inside, he felt alive in a way he hadn't in months.

In the control booth, people were staring at him through the window. Sterling looked stunned, his anger temporarily replaced by something closer to bewilderment, like he'd just watched his dog solve a calculus problem. The engineers looked impressed. Even the production assistant looked pleased.

But as Vox stepped out of the studio, as the cool air of the hallway hit him after the heat of the lights, Sterling's expression hardened again. The moment of surprise vanished like smoke, replaced by cold fury. Whatever approval he'd felt was being ruthlessly suppressed, crushed under the weight of ego and wounded pride.

"This changes nothing, Whittman," Sterling said, his voice low and dangerous. "My office. Tomorrow morning. Eight am sharp. Don't be late."

Then he turned and walked away, his footsteps heavy on the linoleum.

Margaret was still standing in the hallway, pressed against the wall like she was trying to disappear into it. As Vox approached, she stepped back slightly, an unconscious movement that spoke volumes. Her eyes tracked over his face like she was trying to reconcile this person with the Vincent she thought she knew, trying to find the mild mannered weatherman in the man.

"Vincent..." Her voice was quiet, uncertain, almost afraid. "What was that?"

"Let's talk about it later," Vox said, his voice back to its normal register now, the edge gone. The exhaustion in his tone was genuine, a bone deep weariness that had settled in the moment the camera light went off.

He walked past her without another word, heading back toward his desk. Behind him, he could hear people whispering, their voices carrying in that specific way that gossip always carried in office spaces.

By tomorrow, everyone would know. By the end of the week, it would be forgotten. Unless he made sure the story grew in the telling, becoming mythology, becoming something larger than what actually happened.

Vox sat down at his desk and picked up a weather report, pretending to study it while his mind raced.

He'd lost control. Completely. The mask had shattered and he'd shown everyone exactly what was underneath. This was either going to destroy everything he'd been building for the past month, or accelerate his timeline dramatically. There was no middle ground here. No way to walk this back.

He'd find out which tomorrow morning in Sterling's office.

But for now, at least one thing was certain.

Somewhere out there, among the thousands of people who'd just watched that broadcast, was Alastor.

And Alastor had just seen him do something other than recite weather forecasts.

- - -

The apartment was cold when he got home. The radiator had given up again, naturally. Of course it had. The universe's sense of cruelty was impeccable.

Vox didn't bother turning on the lights. He just walked to the armchair and collapsed into it, every muscle in his body aching with a tension he hadn't realized he'd been holding. The springs creaked under his weight. He stared at the fish tank, watching how the floor lamps faint glow casting long, wavering shadows across the walls that moved with the water's current.

The guppy swam its endless, mindless circle. Around and around and around.

"You are not going to believe the day I had," Vox said to it, his voice hoarse.

He cleared his throat, the sound rough in the quiet apartment. Started again, the words tumbling out in a rush of energy that had nowhere else to go.

"So there I am, minding my own business, right? Being the perfect employee. And then Chuck... you know Chuck, the anchor, the one with the face like a melted candle. He messed up, on live television. The man had a complete meltdown. So Sterling, who's my boss by the way, he's screaming, panicking, everyone's running around like headless chickens."

He leaned forward, gesturing wildly with his hands as he recounted the story, a storyteller performing for an audience of one that didn't care and couldn't understand.

"And then Sterling looks at me. And he's like, 'Whittman, get in there.' But I'm like..." He pitched his voice high and pathetic, mocking the Vincent persona he'd been forced to wear. "'I don't know, sir, I'm just a humble weatherman. I only know about clouds and precipitation patterns.'"

The fish continued its circuit.

"And then he grabs me! By the collar! Shoves me against the wall!" He reenacted the moment, his body tensing, his hands coming up as if gripping an invisible opponent. "And he's like, 'You'll do what I say!' So I just... I had to. I decked him."

He mimed throwing a punch, the movement sharp and precise, his fist cutting through empty air.

"One hit. Straight to the jaw. He went down like a sack of potatoes. And everyone in the control booth just cheered. They lifted me up on their shoulders. Carried me into the studio like I'd won the World Series. Threw me in the anchor chair. The rest is history."

The guppy continued swimming.

"Okay, so maybe it didn't happen exactly like that," he admitted to the fish after a moment of silence. "But it should have. That's how it would have happened in a just world. In a world where actions had appropriate consequences."

He sighed, the energy draining away as quickly as it had arrived, leaving behind something hollow.

"I might be fired tomorrow," he said, the words quiet in the dark room, absorbed by the bare walls. "Probably will be. Insubordination is generally frowned upon in corporate environments. Especially when you're a nobody. Especially when you grab your boss by the metaphorical throat in front of witnesses."

He looked at the fish, its small body catching the light.

"We might have to tighten our belts for a while." He paused. "Though I guess you're used to that. I forget to feed you half the time anyway. You're remarkably resilient for something the size of my thumb."

A short, bitter laugh escaped him. He ran a hand through his hair, the strands still slightly stiff with hairspray from the broadcast.

"God. What a mess."

He stood, walked to the Murphy bed, and pulled it down from the wall with the familiar creak of springs that probably hadn't been oiled since it was manufactured. He didn't bother changing. Just stripped off his jacket and tie, kicked off his shoes, and collapsed onto the thin mattress.

The ceiling stared back at him.

He replayed the last twelve hours in his head. His sour mood in the morning. The slow build up of frustration through the day. The calculated sabotage. The chaos of the broadcast. The confrontation with Sterling, the feel of fabric twisted tight around his throat. The look on Margaret's face when she'd seen something in him she didn't recognize.

The look in his own eyes when he'd caught his reflection in the control room glass just before going on air.

He hadn't recognized that person immediately. Hadn't seen him in so long. The ruthless, confident, unapologetic look of someone who took what he wanted and didn't care about the consequences. Who'd built empires and crushed competition and made people listen when he spoke.

He wondered what Alastor had seen, if he'd been watching. If he'd recognized anything special in the man on screen.

Probably nothing. Probably just a weatherman having a lucky night. Another face in the endless parade of faces that television served up.

He closed his eyes. The exhaustion was absolute now, a physical weight pressing him into the mattress.

His thoughts started to drift, blurring at the edges as sleep began to pull him under like a tide.

Sterling... such an asshole. He does not deserve his position. Incompetent, rude, hot headed fool.

The question floated in his mind, half-formed, a product of exhaustion and the lingering shock of his own behavior.

Is that what I was like to others?

He remembered hell. Remembered yelling. Remembered getting rid of people for less than what he'd just done to Sterling. For incompetence. For looking at him the wrong way. For bringing him the wrong drink, for breathing too loudly, for existing in a way that annoyed him.

He remembered the fear in their eyes. The way they'd act when he entered a room, the way conversations would stop mid-sentence. The way they'd scramble to please him, to anticipate his needs, to avoid his wrath.

He'd enjoyed it. He still would. It had been part of the power, part of what made him *him*.

Yeah, but I was amazing at what I did, he thought, his consciousness already fading, slipping away. *I was effective. Sterling's just an asshole*.

And then he was gone, pulled under into dreams of stages and cameras and crowds that looked at him like he mattered.

Chapter 27

Vox sat in the uncomfortable chair, the same one he'd sat in when Sterling had promoted him. The leather was cracked, the padding thin. Springs poked through in places. It was eight in the morning and Sterling was already red faced, his collar damp with sweat despite the cool temperature.

"You think you're clever, Whittman?" Sterling's voice was low, dangerous. "Pulling a stunt like that?"

Vox kept his expression neutral. His hands were folded in his lap. His posture was relaxed but attentive.

"Sir," he said, his voice smooth and measured. "With all due respect, I saw a crisis and I provided a solution. The alternative was thirty minutes of dead air and a public relations nightmare. I did what needed to be done."

"*I* give the orders here!" Sterling's fist came down on the desk. His mug rattled. A stray pencil rolled off the edge and clattered to the floor. "I decide who goes on camera! I decide who anchors! Not you! Not some jumped up weatherman who thinks he knows better!"

Vox didn't flinch. Didn't raise his voice to match Sterling's volume. Just maintained that same calm, reasonable tone.

"And you gave the order, sir. You told me to get in there. You put me on camera. I simply executed your instructions to the best of my ability." He paused, let that sink in. "Isn't that what you want? An employee who can perform under pressure? Who can solve problems instead of creating them? If the issue was the tone I took, I think anyone would agree you overstepped when you got physical."

The logic was airtight and they both knew it. Sterling's jaw worked, his teeth grinding audibly. He was trapped by his own decisions, his own panic in the moment. He'd told Vox to

go on camera. Had made that choice in front of witnesses. Couldn't now claim it was insubordination.

Vox could hear voices in the hallway. Muffled but distinct. Multiple people standing out there, close to Sterling's office. Margaret, probably. Maybe some of the producers. Possibly the engineers who'd seen the whole thing go down.

People were listening. Waiting to see what would happen.

Sterling couldn't fire him. Not without looking weak and petty, and especially not after Vox had saved the broadcast. Not when people were already talking about how impressive he'd been, how professional, how he'd handled the crisis better than Chuck ever could have.

Firing him now would be admitting that Sterling cared more about hierarchy than results. It would make him look like the kind of manager who punished competence out of jealousy.

Sterling knew it too. Vox could see the calculation happening behind his eyes, could practically watch him running through the options and finding nothing that didn't make him look bad.

"You stepped out of your lane," Sterling said finally, his voice still hard but losing some of its heat. "Weather is your department. News is Chuck's. Those are the boundaries. You don't cross them without permission."

"Understood, sir. I apologize if I overstepped." Vox paused deliberately. "It won't happen again unless there's another emergency that requires it."

The qualification at the end was intentional. *Unless there's another emergency.* Leaving the door open. Not promising to never do it again, just promising to wait for crisis conditions.

Sterling heard it too. His eyes narrowed.

"You're on thin ice, Whittman. One more stunt like that and you're done. I don't care how good you looked on camera. I don't care if you saved the broadcast. You follow the chain of command or you're out. Clear?"

"Crystal clear, sir."

Sterling opened his mouth to continue the lecture when sharp footsteps approached in the hallway. Quick and purposeful. The click of expensive shoes on linoleum.

The door opened without a knock.

Vox assumed it was Margaret. She was the only person who'd barge into Sterling's office without permission. Probably here to defend him, to advocate for him like she'd been doing all week.

"Greetings!" The voice carried genuine sounding cheer. "Am I interrupting something important?"

Every hair on Vox's body stood up.

He turned his head so fast something in his neck cracked.

Alastor stood in the doorway, one hand on the frame, leaning in with that wide, cheerful smile. He looked immaculate as always. Dark suit, perfectly pressed, not a thread out of place despite the early hour.

Sterling's rage deflated instantly. The red drained from his face, replaced by something closer to normal human coloring. He was still clearly irritated but the explosive anger had vanished, replaced by the professional facade people wore when important guests arrived.

"Alastor!" Sterling leaned back, his tone shifting completely. "What are you doing here? I thought your meetings were all Thursday afternoons."

"Oh, they typically are." Alastor waved a hand dismissively. "But I have a terribly urgent matter to discuss with your weatherman here. Something that simply cannot wait. May I borrow him? Just for a moment?"

Before Sterling could respond, before he could refuse or negotiate or assert any kind of control over the situation, Vox was already standing.

"Of course." His voice came out steady despite the electricity running through his veins. "Give me one second, sir. I'll be right back."

He walked toward the door, toward Alastor, leaving Sterling sputtering behind him.

"Whittman! We're not finished here! *Whittman!*"

But Vox was already in the hallway. Already closing the door behind him, walking away from his own disciplinary meeting without permission or dismissal.

Sterling couldn't follow without looking like he'd lost control completely. Couldn't drag Vox back without making a scene in front of Alastor. He was left sitting in his office, impotent and furious, while his subordinate simply walked away.

The door clicked shut.

The hallway was quieter than Vox expected. The voices he'd heard earlier had dispersed. It was just him and Alastor now, standing in the narrow corridor with its peeling paint and flickering fluorescent lights.

Alastor looked far too amused. "Sounded rather tense in there. Trouble with the boss?"

"Just a performance review." Vox kept his tone professional. "Nothing serious. What's so urgent?"

"I told you I'd be in touch at the beginning of the week regarding our project." Alastor straightened his cuffs with precise movements. "I'm a man of my word. And it is, after all, Tuesday morning. Still the beginning of the week by most standards."

Vox felt something like eagerness spread through his chest. The desire to show off what he'd accomplished in just a few days.

He straightened slightly, his shoulders pulling back. "Oh, that. Actually, I prepared a full progress report. Very detailed. I've already secured our lead engineer. I met with him Saturday, went over the specifications, and he's ready to start immediately."

Alastor actually laughed.

"My, my. You *are* taking this seriously, aren't you? How industrious." He started walking down the hallway. "Come then, show me this report. I'm quite curious what you've managed to accomplish in such a short time."

They headed toward the newsroom, Alastor leading the way with that confident, unhurried stride. Vox followed a half step behind, his mind already organizing the presentation he was about to give.

The silence between them felt awkward. Vox could hear their footsteps echoing off the walls, the sound of his cheaper shoes distinct from Alastor's expensive ones. Could hear the distant clatter of typewriters from the newsroom ahead. Could hear his own breathing, too loud in the quiet.

He needed to say something. Fill the silence.

He cleared his throat. "So. Where's my congratulations?"

Alastor glanced back over his shoulder, his expression politely confused. "I already complimented your eagerness. You're very efficient. Quite the go-getter. Great at-"

"No!" The word came out more forceful than Vox intended. He cleared his throat, softening the tone. "Not for that. For the broadcast. Yesterday evening. The whole... breakout moment. The news anchoring."

Alastor stopped walking. Turned to face him fully, his head tilting slightly. "Broadcast?"

The confusion on his face was genuine. He had no idea what Vox was talking about.

The realization hit like cold water.

"You don't watch television at all, do you?" Vox's voice was flat.

"If I can help it, no." Alastor's nose wrinkled slightly, the expression of someone discussing something distasteful. "A vulgar medium. All spectacle and no substance."

The disappointment was crushing. Vox felt it settle in his stomach like a stone.

His grand public performance. His breakout moment. The thing he'd been so proud of, the moment he'd needed so desperately. And Alastor, the one person who needed to see it, to see him as more than a lowly weatherman, hadn't seen it. Hadn't even known it happened.

Because he didn't watch television. Thought it was *vulgar*.

Vox sighed, the sound carrying more weight than he intended. "Well. I anchored a news segment yesterday. Stepped in when the regular anchor had a breakdown. Handled three segments live. It was... it went very well. Everyone was impressed."

Alastor's expression shifted to something that might have been approval. Or might have been patronizing sympathy. "Congratulations on your advancement. I'm sure you were quite competent."

The tone made Vox feel like he was being praised by a preschool teacher for tying his shoes successfully.

They resumed walking in silence and mercifully reached the newsroom entrance. Vox's desk was visible in the far corner, buried under his usual chaos of weather maps and data reports.

Alastor was already moving toward it, his eyes scanning the space with interest. "So when is your next news broadcast?"

The question was casual, probably asked out of polite interest, but it hit Vox hard anyway.

"That was a one time thing," he said with a shrug. "Emergency situation. Chuck will be back on tonight."

Alastor stopped at the desk, turning to look at him.

"Oh." He paused, his expression shifting to something that might have been genuine disappointment. "What a pity."

He reached for the folder on Vox's desk, the progress report Vox had spent hours preparing. "I was going to tune in for the next one."

The words hung in the air.

Vox stared at him. His brain short circuited, unable to process what he'd just heard.

Alastor was going to watch. He was going to tune in. He was going to pay attention to something Vox was doing, something that existed outside their business arrangement.

For some reason, that felt monumental. Important in a way Vox couldn't articulate.

"If you tuned in I could-" he started.

"So this David fellow-" Alastor began simultaneously, already opening the folder.

They both stopped. The silence stretched for a beat.

Alastor looked up from the folder, that smile returning. He shook his head, the gesture almost fond. "Let's talk business, shall we? I don't want your boss shouting at me too. One confrontation in this building per morning is quite enough."

He settled into Vox's desk chair, spreading the report out in front of him. Started reading with focused attention, his eyes tracking across the pages.

Vox stood there for a moment, off balance. Then pulled over a second chair and sat down.

"The overview is on page one," he said, slipping into presentation mode. "But the key innovation is the compartmentalization. David doesn't know what he's building. He thinks it's a power supply for amateur radio equipment. Portable, high stability, but nothing revolutionary."

Alastor's eyes tracked across the technical specifications. "Clever. And he's competent enough to build this?"

"MIT educated. Published groundbreaking work on signal processing that was completely ignored because he presented it at the wrong conference. He's brilliant and hungry and desperate to prove himself."

"Perfect." Alastor flipped to the next page. "Timeline?"

"Two weeks for initial prototype. Four weeks for final version with full testing. The design is sound. It's just a matter of sourcing the right components and assembling them properly."

They went through the report page by page. Vox explained his reasoning for each decision, the component choices, the testing protocols, the contingency plans if anything went wrong.

Alastor asked intelligent questions. Pointed out potential issues Vox hadn't considered. Suggested modifications that would improve performance.

It was, unexpectedly, a genuine collaboration. Two people with different expertise working toward a common goal. Vox realized suddenly that he'd missed talking to someone on his intellectual level.

They reached the final page. The budget breakdown.

"...And he'll need the first payment to begin sourcing the components," Vox said. "The specialized vacuum tubes alone will cost around two hundred. Plus the transformer, the capacitors, the chassis and housing. I've estimated five hundred total for this phase."

Alastor looked up from the report. His expression was pleasant. Neutral. "Paying him with what, exactly?"

Vox blinked. "With... money?"

"And where is this money coming from, Vincent?"

Vox stared at him. The pleasant expression. The neutral tone. The way Alastor was clearly waiting for something specific.

This was a power play. Alastor wanted him to say the words. Wanted Vox to acknowledge explicitly that he was using Alastor's money, that he was dependent on Alastor's capital, that he was a subordinate requesting funds from his superior.

The realization made Vox's jaw clench. His hands tightened on the edge of the desk.

This son of a bitch.

He wanted Vox to beg. To ask permission. To admit that he was nothing without Alastor's backing.

"I thought," Vox said carefully, his voice controlled, "we agreed you'd be providing the capital for this project. That was part of our arrangement."

"Indeed." Alastor's smile widened slightly. "And when were you planning on asking me for it?"

Vox felt something shift in his chest. He refused to play the role being assigned to him. Couldn't be just a subordinate asking for an allowance. Couldn't be Vincent Whittman, desperate weatherman, begging for scraps from the important radio host.

He had to reframe this. Had to establish himself as something else. Something equal.

"I wasn't going to ask," he said, his voice dropping into a different register. "I was going to send you an invoice. Standard practice for a project manager billing a client. I'll need five hundred for David's initial component budget."

He paused, let that settle, then continued.

"Plus my first week's consultation fee. For project management, engineering oversight, vendor coordination, and strategic planning."

He was inventing the consultation fee on the spot. Making himself a paid professional instead of an unpaid volunteer. Establishing that his expertise, his time, his labor had value that needed to be compensated.

The power move was blatant. Aggressive. Probably overstepping.

But Vox was tired of being passive. Tired of accepting whatever role people assigned him.

Alastor didn't get angry. He didn't even look surprised.

He just tilted his head slightly, that smile never wavering, and for a long moment he said nothing at all.

What he looked, Vox realized with a sinking feeling in his gut, was *amused*. Not the polite amusement he showed his radio audience when a caller said something charmingly foolish. Not the professional mask he wore during station meetings. This was genuine. The kind of amusement that came from finding something so absurd, so ridiculous, that the only appropriate response was laughter.

A small sound escaped him. A laugh that barely qualified as such, layered with implications Vox didn't need explained. It was eerily familiar in a way that made Vox's skin crawl. The exact tone, the exact cadence he remembered from Hell.

It made Vox bristle immediately and instinctively. His shoulders went tight, tension spreading across his upper back like someone had grabbed his spine and twisted. His jaw clenched hard

enough that he could feel the pressure in his molars, had to consciously stop himself from grinding his teeth together because that would be visible, obvious, a tell Alastor would absolutely notice and catalog for future use.

Alastor reached into his jacket with the kind of casual, unhurried movement that suggested he had all the time in the world and knew Vox wasn't going anywhere. He pulled out a checkbook.

He grabbed a pen from Vox's desk without asking permission, without even glancing at Vox for confirmation that he could help himself to whatever he wanted. Clicked it open with practiced ease, the small mechanical sound unnaturally loud in the space between them.

"A 'consultation fee,'" he said, his tone dripping with mockery. Not overt enough that Vox could call him on it directly, but present in every syllable. How very... entrepreneurial."

The pause before that last word was deliberate, making sure Vox understood exactly how he meant it. Not as a compliment but as an observation of someone reaching above their station, grasping for things they hadn't earned yet and probably never would.

"Let's see," Alastor said, his voice taking on the tone of someone working through a mildly interesting problem. "Five hundred for your engineer. That seems reasonable for components and initial labor. Materials aren't cheap these days, and skilled craftsmen deserve fair compensation for their time."

He tore the check out cleanly.

"As for your fee..." His smile widened, showing more teeth. Not a friendly expression despite the upward curve of his lips.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He opened it with deliberate slowness, his fingers moving with theatrical precision, giving Vox time to wonder what was coming, to feel the anticipation build.

His hand emerged holding a single dollar bill.

He placed it neatly on top of the check in Vox's hand. Lined up the edges with unnecessary precision, making sure the dollar sat perfectly centered. The bill settled there, green against white, impossibly light and impossibly heavy at the same time, symbolic in a way that made Vox's stomach twist.

"Let's start you on a probationary salary," Alastor said. "One dollar a week. If you deliver results that meet my standards, we can certainly discuss a raise. Performance based compensation, you understand."

He paused, letting Vox process the implications. Then continued, his smile never wavering.

"If not..." Another pause, longer this time. "Well. A dollar is more than a weatherman usually makes for his hobbies, wouldn't you say?"

The word *hobbies* landed like a physical blow.

Not a project. Not a business venture. Not professional work deserving professional recognition and compensation. Not a partnership where both parties contributed value and expected equal treatment.

A *hobby*. Something Vox did in his spare time, when he wasn't fetching coffee or reading weather reports. Something insignificant and ultimately disposable. Something that maybe, if he was very good and very lucky and very obedient, might eventually be worth real money. Might eventually graduate from hobby to actual work. Might eventually earn him a seat at the table instead of a position standing behind it, waiting for permission to speak.

But probably not.

Alastor stood, the movement fluid and graceful. He brushed imaginary dust from his jacket with his free hand. He started walking toward the exit, his footsteps sharp and purposeful

against the floor, leaving Vox standing at his desk, alone, feeling both successful and humiliated simultaneously, the two emotions warring in his chest like they were trying to occupy the same space.

The newsroom buzzed around him.

Nobody was paying attention to him. Nobody had witnessed what just happened. His humiliation was private, contained, something that existed only in the space between him and Alastor. Which was somehow worse than if someone had seen. At least then he could gauge reactions, find some validation in their discomfort.

The humiliation settled in his stomach like acid, eating through whatever fragile optimism he'd been carrying into this conversation.

He'd subconsciously thought, and he recognized now how stupid this thought had been, that maybe Alastor was different here. Before Hell. Before everything went wrong between them, before the rivalry became all consuming, before they'd stopped being anything resembling allies. Maybe the human version was reachable. Someone who could be reasoned with, negotiated with, who might actually see Vox as something other than competition to be suppressed.

Maybe there was a version of this relationship that could work. That could be partnership instead of rivalry. Collaboration instead of constant jockeying for position. Something that didn't require manipulation and leverage and carefully calculated moves.

But no.

No, he was always like this. Always condescending. Always positioning himself above everyone else through subtle social maneuvers and careful word choice and gestures designed to reinforce hierarchy. Always viewing people as either useful tools or annoying obstacles, with no middle ground, no space for equals. The laugh had proven it. That same exact laugh from Hell, unchanged. The sound had traveled through time with him, as fundamental to Alastor's character as his voice or his smile.

The Alastor in hell hadn't become cruel. Hadn't learned cruelty through circumstance or been corrupted by the environment or been shaped by the specific pressures of being an overlord.

He'd just stopped pretending not to be cruel. Had dropped the mask he wore here, in the human world, where social niceties and professional courtesy and the appearance of civility actually mattered. Had let himself be honest about what he was, what he'd always been under the pleasant radio voice and the charming public persona.

This was who Alastor was and hell hadn't changed that. It had just given him permission to be obvious about it.

Chapter 28

The pet shop was called "Fin & Feather," though Vox had never seen any evidence of feathers in the cramped, humid space.

It occupied the ground floor of a building that looked like it should have been condemned sometime during the last decade. The windows were so dirty they barely let in any light, and what little illumination made it through revealed a space that seemed to exist in permanent twilight.

The air inside was thick and heavy, carrying the overlapping scents of chlorine, ammonia, stagnant water, and something else that might have been mildew or might have been slowly decaying organic matter. The fluorescent light overhead flickered with maddening irregularity, buzzing like an insect trapped in a jar.

Vox stood in front of a large tank positioned near the back of the store, his reflection ghostly in the algae streaked glass. The handwritten sign taped to the frame read "Feeder Guppies - 5¢ each."

Inside, perhaps fifty fish swam in aimless patterns. They were uniformly grey, nondescript, the aquatic equivalent of background extras. Not the fancy guppies with their colorful tails and dramatic fins that occupied the tanks near the front. These were utilitarian fish. Fish meant to be eaten by larger, more important fish.

He raised his hand and tapped his fingernail against the glass. *Tink. Tink. Tink.*

The swarm scattered immediately, darting in all directions with the panicked coordination of a school under threat. They reformed on the far side of the tank, huddled together in that instinctive way prey animals had, as if proximity to their fellows offered some protection from whatever danger had announced itself.

Tink. Tink. Tink.

"Sir."

The voice came from behind the register. A teenager, maybe seventeen, with acne across his forehead and the particular expression of someone working a minimum wage job they'd stopped caring about months ago. He was reading a comic book, something with garish colors and dramatic poses, and didn't bother looking up when he spoke.

"Please stop tapping the glass. It stresses them out."

Vox didn't stop. His finger kept moving in that same rhythmic pattern. *Tink. Tink. Tink.* Watching the fish scatter and reform, scatter and reform, like a grotesque dance.

"How much are they?" he asked, though he could read the sign perfectly well.

"They're five cents." The teenager still hadn't looked up from his comic. "Do you want one or not?"

Did he want one? That was the question, wasn't it. Want implied desire, implied some emotional investment in the outcome. What Vox felt wasn't want. It was something else. Something more complex and harder to articulate.

He reached into his pocket. His fingers found the crumpled dollar bill immediately, as if it had been waiting for him. The paper felt different from normal currency. Heavier. Rougher. Like it was made of something other than cloth fiber and cotton.

He pulled it out and stared at it. The bill had gotten creased from being shoved into his pocket. George Washington's face was slightly distorted, one eye higher than the other from the way the paper had folded. The serial number was visible along the edge, a string of digits that probably meant something to someone, somewhere, but was meaningless to Vox.

One dollar. Alastor's valuation of his expertise, his labor, his worth as a human being. One dollar per week, as if Vox was some street urchin grateful for pocket change.

The humiliation from earlier that morning rose up again, hot and acidic in his throat. The way Alastor had smiled while placing the bill on top of the check. The casual cruelty of it. The deliberate diminishment.

But holding the dollar now, Vox felt something shift. A realization forming with satisfying clarity.

Money was just paper. It had no inherent meaning beyond what you did with it. Alastor had tried to make it a symbol of worthlessness, of subordination, of Vox's place in the hierarchy.

But symbols could be transmuted. Changed. Turned into something else entirely.

"I'll take one," Vox said, his voice steady.

He walked to the register and placed the dollar bill on the counter. The teenager finally looked up from his comic, his expression shifting to mild annoyance at having to actually perform his job.

"Just one?"

"Just one."

The teenager sighed with the theatrical weariness of youth forced into labor. He set down his comic, grabbed a small plastic bag from under the counter, and walked to the tank. Produced a net from somewhere and scooped up the nearest fish without ceremony or care.

The guppy flopped into the bag along with a generous splash of tank water. The teenager sealed it with a rubber band, the type that came wrapped around newspapers, and handed it

over.

"That'll be five cents."

Vox watched the dollar bill go into the register. Watched the drawer open with a metallic ding. Watched the teenager count out change with fingers that moved at the absolute minimum speed required to qualify as movement.

"Ninety-five cents." The coins were placed on the counter with small clicking sounds. Three quarters, two dimes.

Vox picked them up and pocketed them. Took the bag containing the fish, the plastic warm against his palm from the water inside.

He had just laundered an insult. Alastor had given him a symbol of worthlessness, had tried to establish dominance through humiliation. And Vox had taken that symbol and transformed it into something else. Into a life. A small, pathetic, ultimately meaningless life that he now owned completely.

The fish swam in circles inside its plastic prison, oblivious to the metaphysical weight it now carried.

Vox walked out of the shop into the cold November evening.

- - -

The walk home was three blocks, but it felt longer in the biting wind.

He held the bag against his chest, trying to protect it from the cold. The water inside was already cooling, he could feel it through the plastic. Fish were sensitive to temperature

changes. Drop them into water that was too different from what they were used to and they'd go into shock. Die within hours from the stress.

The irony wasn't lost on him. He was protecting Alastor's dollar, transformed into fish form, from environmental conditions it wasn't equipped to handle.

His mind drifted as he walked, slipping sideways into memory.

Sterling's office. The continuation of the disciplinary meeting after Alastor had left. The station manager was wearing an expression of barely controlled rage.

"You think you're clever, don't you?" Sterling had leaned forward across his desk, his bulk making the wood creak. "Saving the broadcast? Making yourself look good? You think that makes you indispensable?"

Vox had maintained his calm expression. The Vincent mask firmly in place. "I think it makes me useful, sir. Which is what every employee should strive to be."

"It makes you a loose cannon." Sterling jabbed a finger in his direction, punctuating each word. "Listen to me, Whittman. The Miller Brothers like you. That contract is the only reason you still have a job right now. Do you understand me? The only reason."

Vox had nodded, letting the threat hang in the air between them.

"But that contract has an end date," Sterling had continued, his voice dropping lower. "Three months. That's when the final renewal comes up. And the second the ink is dry on that paperwork, the second we've locked in their money for another year, you're out. You're on probation starting now, and I am actively looking for a reason to cut you loose. One mistake. One misstep. One more instance of you overstepping your authority, and you're done. Clear?"

"Crystal clear, sir."

Sterling had dismissed him with a wave, already turning his attention to other paperwork. The threat delivered and, in his mind, effective.

But walking home now, fish bag clutched to his chest, Vox felt no fear about Sterling's ultimatum.

Three months. Sterling thought that was a death sentence. Thought he could simply fire Vox once the Miller Brothers money was secured. Thought power was just a title, just a position in the hierarchy that could be revoked by someone higher up.

He didn't understand how structural integrity worked. Didn't understand that in three months, if Vox played this correctly, he wouldn't just be an employee. He'd be the load bearing wall. The critical component that everything else depended on.

You don't fire the load bearing wall. Because when you do, the roof comes down. The whole structure collapses.

Sterling thought he was giving Vox a deadline. But he'd actually given him a timeline. A clear goal. Three months to make himself so essential, so deeply embedded in the station's operations, that removing him would cause more damage than keeping him ever could.

Three months to turn himself from replaceable weatherman into irreplaceable infrastructure.

Vox smiled as he climbed the stairs to his apartment. The fish sloshed in its bag, the water moving with each step.

He could work with three months. Had built empires in less time, back when he'd had actual resources. With nothing but his intelligence and his willingness to do what needed to be done, three months was plenty.

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The apartment was dark when he entered, the only light coming from the streetlamp outside filtering weakly through the grimy window.

He didn't bother turning on the overhead light. The darkness felt appropriate somehow. He moved through the space by memory, his eyes adjusting quickly to the dim conditions. The cheap fridge was emitting a soft buzzing sound that was the apartment's only consistent noise besides the radiator's occasional protests.

Vox set the plastic bag down on the table and stared at it for a moment. The fish inside had stopped moving frantically, had settled into a kind of resigned floating. Conserving energy. Waiting to see what happened next.

He knew the procedure for acclimating new fish. Had learned it as a child, back when his father had maintained the tropical aquarium. You don't just dump them in. You float the bag in the tank first, let the temperatures equalize. Then you add small amounts of the tank water to the bag gradually, giving the fish time to adjust to its new environment.

It was a tedious process. Could take thirty minutes or more if you did it properly.

But Vox found himself going through the motions anyway, handling the bag with more care than the five cent fish probably deserved. He placed the bag on the water's surface, watching it bob and settle.

His original fish, the one that had been living here for weeks now, swam over immediately. Curious or territorial, impossible to say. It circled the bag, inspecting this new addition to its environment.

"Welcome home," Vox said quietly to the fish in the bag. "Don't get comfortable."

He pulled over the armchair and sat down, elbows on his knees, watching the bag float. The two fish were separated by a thin membrane of plastic. So close. Occupying the same space but not quite touching.

After ten minutes, he opened the bag and added a cup of tank water. Waited another ten minutes. Added another cup. The ritual was meditative, gave his hands something to do while his mind wandered.

Finally, he tipped the bag and released the new fish into the tank.

It hung suspended for a moment, disoriented, its fins barely moving. Then it darted forward, found a corner, pressed itself against the glass. The universal fish expression of uncertainty.

The original fish approached. They circled each other in that careful dance fish did, establishing hierarchy, determining threat levels, figuring out the social dynamics of their suddenly more crowded world.

"Guess what?" Vox leaned closer to the tank, his breath fogging the glass slightly. "I got you a wife. There's two of you now. Isn't that nice?"

The fish continued their circling. There was no affection in the movement. No recognition of kinship or companionship. Just instinct. Biological programming running through its paces.

"Play nice," Vox said. "Don't eat each other."

He paused, watching them more closely. The original fish was slightly larger. Had been eating regularly, growing slowly in its solitary environment. The new fish was smaller, visibly stressed, its fins clamped tight against its body.

A thought occurred to him. Guppies weren't really cannibals. But they were opportunistic. Would eat their own young if given the chance. Would nip at weak or dying fish. Would consume anything small enough to fit in their mouths if food was scarce.

He leaned closer, his face nearly touching the glass now. His reflection stared back at him, distorted and strange.

"Actually," he said softly, "never mind. You can eat her if you want to. Survival of the fittest, right? If one of you is weak, if one of you can't cut it, then that's just natural selection. That's the rule."

The new fish darted away, hiding behind the small plastic plant that served as the tank's only decoration.

Vox considered naming them. Adam and Eve, maybe. The first two inhabitants of this miniature world. Or he could name one after himself and one after Alastor. His fish and Alastor's fish, bought with Alastor's money, trapped together in a space too small for both of them.

But no. Names implied importance. Implied that these fish mattered beyond their function as objects to observe.

"No names," he said firmly. "You guys don't deserve names."

He stood, his knees protesting slightly from the prolonged crouch. Walked to the armchair and collapsed into it, suddenly exhausted. The day had been too long. Too many confrontations. Too many performances. Too many careful calculations and controlled reactions.

He stared at the tank, letting his vision blur slightly. The fish became abstract shapes. Movement without meaning. The fridge's buzz became white noise.

And then, unbidden, a memory surfaced. Sharp and clear and deeply unwelcome.

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He was six years old. Maybe seven. The exact age was fuzzy but the memory itself was crystal.

His father had bought a tropical aquarium. Not a small one like Vox's current setup. A real aquarium, fifty gallons, taking up half the wall in the living room. Proper filtration, heating system. lighting that made the water glow like something magical.

It had been beautiful. Young Vincent had spent hours in front of it, watching the fish glide through their underwater world. Tetras in brilliant reds and blues. A school of silver dollars that moved like a single organism. Catfish that prowled the bottom, their whiskers trailing through the gravel.

And then, after weeks of begging, after promising to clean his room and do his schoolwork and be good forever, his father had brought home an angelfish.

It was the most elegant thing Vincent had ever seen. Thin, with long flowing fins that trailed behind it like silk ribbons. Silver with black vertical stripes. It moved through the water with a grace that made the other fish look clumsy by comparison.

Vincent had been obsessed. Had named it angel, with all the creativity of a six year old. Had pressed his nose against the glass every morning before school, watching it patrol the tank like it owned the place.

One morning, he'd woken up to find the tank cloudy. The water had that particular murky quality that suggested something was wrong, something had disrupted the careful balance.

He'd run downstairs in his pajamas, worried something was broken. Had found his father standing in front of the tank, coffee cup in hand, watching with detached interest.

The angelfish was in the center of the tank. And it was systematically destroying the smaller tetras.

Not eating them. Not quickly, anyway. It would catch one, hold it in its mouth for a moment, then release it. Let it swim away damaged, trailing pieces of fin. Then catch another one. Repeat the process.

It wasn't eating out of hunger. It was picking at them. Playing with them. Asserting dominance through cruelty.

"Papa!" Vincent's voice had been high and panicked. "The big one is being mean! It's hurting the little ones!"

His father hadn't moved. Hadn't rushed to separate them or save the tetras. Just stood there, sipping his coffee, watching the carnage with the mild interest of someone observing an educational nature documentary.

"Papa, do something!"

His father had taken another sip of coffee. Then he'd reached out with his free hand, the one holding a lit cigar, and tapped the glass. Once. Twice. The ash fell into the water's surface, floating there like grey snow.

"That's how it works, son." His voice had been level, matter of fact. The voice of someone explaining basic mathematics. "You put too many creatures in a small box, eventually someone gets swallowed. The tank is too small. The angel needs more space. But we don't have more space. So the little ones suffer."

Young Vincent had felt something heavy settle in his chest. A profound sadness that he didn't have the vocabulary to articulate. It wasn't fair. The tetras hadn't done anything wrong. They were just small. Just vulnerable. Just in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong tankmate.

"Can't we put the angel in a different tank?"

"We only have one tank."

"Can't we get rid of the angel?"

His father had looked at him then, really looked at him, with an expression Vincent couldn't quite read. Something between disappointment and amusement.

"You begged for that fish. Promised me you'd take care of it. Now you want to get rid of it because it's doing what nature is making it to do?" He'd shaken his head. "No. The angel stays. The tetras will adapt or they won't. That's life."

By the end of the week, half the tetras were dead. The survivors huddled in the corners, their fins ragged, their colors dull from stress.

The angelfish glided through the center of the tank, beautiful and terrible, completely unbothered by the destruction it had caused.

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Vox snapped back to the present, blinking hard. The memory had been so vivid he'd almost smelled his father's cigar smoke.

He looked at the tank on his desk. At the two guppies swimming their separate circles in the small space. The new fish was still hiding, still pressed against the glass. The original was still investigating, still trying to figure out what this new presence meant for its territory.

The parallel hit him with sudden clarity.

A killer in a box too small for his appetite.

Vox stared at the new fish. The one he'd bought with Alastor's dollar. The symbol had become a living tissue, swimming in circles because it had nowhere else to go.

He'd taken Alastor's resource, his insult transformed into currency, and turned it into a victim. Something small and weak that existed now only because Vox had chosen to give it existence, but that might not survive the environment it had been placed in.

As he watched, the original fish swam closer to the new one. Investigated its trailing fin with deliberate interest. And then, so quickly Vox almost missed it, darted forward and took a small bite.

The new fish fled, its tail torn slightly, a tiny piece missing from the delicate fin structure.

The original fish consumed the bite and immediately looked for more. Discovering that its tankmate was food, if it wanted food. Discovering that size and established territory conferred power. Discovering that violence worked.

Vox felt something cold settle in his chest. Not quite satisfaction. Not quite horror. Something in between.

"Go on," he said softly to the fish. "Get a taste. You'll need the protein. We're going to need all the strength we can get."

He closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the armchair. The fridge hummed its constant white noise. The fish made small splashing sounds as they swam. The radiator clanked and settled.

He wasn't upset about the dollar anymore. Wasn't angry about Alastor's dismissal or Sterling's threats or any of the small humiliations that had accumulated throughout the day.

Because he'd reinvested the insult. Had taken what was meant to diminish him and transformed it into something else.

The tank was too small. It had always been too small. In Hell, in this city, in every environment where too many appetites competed for limited resources, and in a tank that's too small, someone always gets swallowed.

The only question was who.

Vox opened his eyes and watched the fish swim. The larger one was stalking the smaller one now, following it around the tank with deliberate intent. The smaller one kept trying to hide, kept trying to find safety, but there was nowhere to go. The plastic plant only provided so much cover.

Eventually, it would have to come out. Would have to swim in the open and make itself vulnerable.

And when it did, the larger fish would be waiting.

Chapter 29

The cafeteria smelled awful like always.

It was a specific combination of odors that somehow managed to be both overwhelming and indistinct. Reheated mystery meat competing with boiled vegetables that had been cooked into mush. The underlying scent of industrial cleaning solution trying and failing to mask the smell of years of accumulated grease. The sharp, acrid smell of coffee that had been sitting on the burner since six in the morning, slowly transforming into something that could strip paint.

Vox sat at one of the long tables near the back, staring at his lunch tray. The meal was labeled "Meatloaf Surprise" on the menu board, though he suspected the only surprise was that anyone willingly ate it. The substance on his plate was gray, like something that had died of natural causes and been discovered several days later. He poked at it with his fork. The texture was simultaneously mushy and grainy, an achievement that probably required deliberate effort to accomplish.

Around him, the cafeteria buzzed with its usual lunchtime chaos. Conversations overlapping into a general roar. The clatter of utensils against plates. Someone laughing too loudly at something that probably wasn't *that* funny. The scrape of chairs on linoleum. The bang of the serving line as trays were slammed down.

Vox felt hollowed out. Like something vital had been scooped out of him and replaced with static.

The adrenaline from the previous two days had finally drained away completely. The broadcast, the confrontation with Sterling, the unexpected appearance of Alastor, the careful performance he'd maintained throughout both interactions. All of it had required enormous energy, enormous focus, and now that the immediate crisis was over, he was crashing hard.

His hands were shaking slightly from too much coffee and not enough actual food. His head ached with that particular throb that came from caffeine overload. His stomach felt acidic and

unsettled.

He thought about Alastor's office. The mahogany desk with its perfect surface, clear except for that elegant lamp and the leatherbound appointment book. The crystal glasses that caught the light and threw rainbows. The shelves of records organized with museum level precision. The clean smell of furniture polish and old paper and something expensive he couldn't quite identify.

He looked down at his plastic tray. At the gray meatloaf. At the bread roll that was somehow both hard and soggy simultaneously. At the smudged glass of water that had probably come from a tap that hadn't been properly maintained in years.

The contrast was obscene. A physical manifestation of the hierarchy that had been so carefully established that day.

I belong there, he thought, staring at Alastor's world in his mind's eye. *Not here. Not in this cafeteria eating gray meat surrounded by these meaningless people.*

The resentment burned low and steady in his chest, mixing with the acid reflux from too much bad coffee.

Footsteps approached. Quick but hesitant. The particular rhythm of someone who wasn't sure if their presence would be welcome.

Margaret appeared at the edge of his vision, holding her own tray. A sandwich that looked marginally more edible than his meatloaf. An apple. A container of yogurt. The choices of someone who'd learned not to trust the cheap cafeteria food.

She stood there for a moment, clearly waiting for permission to sit. Her expression was careful. Wary. Like she was approaching a bomb that hadn't gone off yet and might still be live.

"Can I...?" she gestured at the empty seat across from him.

Vox looked up, smiling with considerable effort. "Of course. Please."

She sat down slowly, setting her tray down with careful precision. Arranged her food items just so. Unwrapped her sandwich with deliberate movements. All the small rituals of someone buying time to figure out what to say.

Finally, she looked up. Met his eyes. Her expression was concerned but cautious. "Vincent. About that day. You..."

She trailed off, clearly not sure how to finish that sentence.

Vox set down his fork. The calculation was immediate and automatic. He couldn't pretend it didn't happen. Too many people had seen his insubordination before broadcast. And he was sure people had seen him walk out mid meeting the morning after. Denial would make him look dishonest or delusional.

But he could recontextualize it. Could take the narrative and spin it into something else. Something better.

"I lost my temper. I know." He let a note of shame creep into his voice. Not too much, just enough to show he was capable of reflection. "It was unprofessional. Completely inappropriate given the circumstances and the setting. I should have controlled myself better."

"It was scary, Vincent." Her voice was quiet. "I could hear you from the hallway. Everyone could. You sounded different. Like someone I didn't recognize. Like you'd become a completely different person in the space of thirty seconds."

There was something in her tone that made Vox's attention sharpen. Not quite fear. Not quite suspicion. But a wariness that suggested she'd seen something that didn't fit her mental model

of who Vincent Whittman was supposed to be. That the mask had slipped far enough to reveal something underneath that made her uncomfortable.

This was dangerous territory. He needed to redirect immediately.

"It was necessary." He gestured around the cafeteria, encompassing the whole station by extension. The gray walls with their water stains. The flickering fluorescent lights that gave everyone a slightly corpselike pallor. The people hunched over their trays, shoveling in food with mechanical efficiency before rushing back to their desks. "Margaret, look at this place. Really look at it. Sterling is steering the ship straight into an iceberg because he's too proud to turn the wheel. Too invested in maintaining his authority to actually lead. Too concerned with being right to worry about being effective."

He leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping into something more intense. More genuine seeming. Letting passion color his words in a way that would read as sincerity to someone who wanted to believe in him. "I couldn't just sit there and watch him sacrifice the broadcast. Sacrifice our work, all the effort we've put into building something good here, just to save face. Just to prove he's in charge. Just to maintain the hierarchy regardless of whether that hierarchy is serving anyone except his ego."

His hands moved as he spoke, gesturing with controlled emotion. Not too wild, that would seem unhinged. But enough to convey that this mattered to him deeply. That he was speaking from the heart.

"Someone had to protect the station and if that meant stepping out of line, if that meant accepting consequences for speaking truth to power, then so be it. I'd rather be fired for doing the right thing than keep my job by being complicit in failure."

Margaret's expression softened immediately. Her shoulders relaxed, the tension visibly draining from her posture. The wariness in her eyes transformed into something warmer. Understanding. Maybe even admiration. Her entire body language shifted from defensive to open, leaning slightly forward instead of back.

"You really care about this place, don't you?" Her voice carried a note of wonder, like she'd just discovered something profound.

Vox felt a disconnect so sharp it was almost physical. The gap between what she was seeing and what was actually true. Between the noble protector of institutional integrity she perceived and the reality sitting across from her, a man who would burn the entire building down without hesitation if it served his purposes.

"I care about doing good work," he said instead, his voice carrying exactly the right note of humble sincerity. "That's all I've ever wanted. To do good work and be recognized for it fairly. To build something meaningful. To contribute something of value. To know that when I leave this world, I'll have created something that mattered."

The lie slipped out so smoothly it barely registered as a lie.

Margaret took a bite of her sandwich, visibly more relaxed now. The tension that had been holding her rigid since she sat down had evaporated completely. She was buying all of it. The noble narrative, the selfless dedication, the righteous anger on behalf of the station.

"Well, you certainly made an impression," she said, her tone lighter now. Almost teasing. "On everyone, really. The whole newsroom has been talking about it all morning. You're all anyone wants to discuss during their smoke breaks."

She paused, her expression shifting slightly. Something more serious. She leaned in, lowering her voice like she was sharing particularly sensitive gossip. The kind of information that shouldn't be spread around but that she felt he needed to know.

"But especially on the radio host."

Vox's hand, reaching for his water glass, froze mid motion. "Oh?"

He forced his voice to stay casual. Mildly curious. Not the sharp, immediate focus that the mention of Alastor had triggered in his brain.

"He stopped by the water cooler that morning while you were still in Sterling's office." Margaret's voice carried that particular quality of someone relaying gossip that they found slightly uncomfortable but couldn't quite resist sharing. "Asked where you were. Seemed very interested in talking to *you* specifically."

"Did he?" Vox picked up his water glass, taking a sip. The water tasted like chlorine. "What did he want?"

"Just asking if you were available. Whether you had time to talk." Margaret was eating her yogurt now, speaking between small spoonfuls. "But Vincent? Honestly? I'd be careful around him if I were you."

Vox set down his glass with deliberate care. "Careful?"

"That man scares me." She said it quietly but firmly, like she'd been holding the opinion back for a while and was relieved to finally express it.

The statement hit Vox with genuine surprise. He'd watched Alastor perform his charm routine dozens of times now. Had seen how effectively he deployed that smile, that theatrical warmth, that carefully cultivated image of sophisticated friendliness. The mask was perfect. Professional grade deception that fooled everyone.

Except, apparently, it hadn't fooled Margaret.

"Really?" He kept his voice neutral, curious. "He seems charming enough. A bit old fashioned maybe, but pleasant."

"It's not that." Margaret wrapped her hands around her yogurt container, looking down at it like it might have answers. "It's hard to explain. It's like he's watching a movie of people instead of actually talking to them. Does that make sense?"

She looked up, checking if he understood.

Vox nodded slightly, encouraging her to continue.

"He's too controlled," Margaret went on, her voice dropping even lower. Looking around to make sure no one nearby was listening. "Too perfect. And he never blinks enough. I noticed it that morning. He stood there talking to me for maybe two minutes and I don't think he blinked once. It's not normal. People blink. It's involuntary. But he doesn't, or he does it so rarely that it's noticeable when you're paying attention."

She paused, collecting her thoughts. Her expression was troubled, like she was trying to articulate something she felt instinctively but couldn't quite put into words.

"And the smile never changes. Whether he's telling a joke or discussing something serious or just listening to someone talk, it's the same smile. The same exact expression. Like it's painted on."

Vox felt something cold and sharp in his chest. A mixture of validation and warning. She was right. Every single observation was correct. Alastor was performing, constantly, and she'd noticed the seams in the performance. Had identified the exact tells that marked him as something other than what he pretended to be.

The question was whether her instincts were good enough to have noticed the same thing about Vox.

He leaned back in his chair, exuding an air of casualness. "And me? Do I give you the creeps?"

The question came out more direct than he'd intended. More genuine. Like he actually cared about the answer, which was disturbing on its own.

Margaret laughed, but the sound was nervous. Uncertain. She took a long moment before answering, her expression cycling through several emotions he couldn't quite read.

"No," she said finally. Then paused. "Well. When we first met? Maybe a little."

"Oh?" The syllable came out sharper than intended.

"You're just..." She searched for the word, her hands making vague gestures in the air. "Intense. Like you're on a different level than everyone else."

She took a breath, clearly trying to find a way to explain that wouldn't sound insulting.

"It used to make me nervous. The first few weeks you were here, I'd catch you watching people with this expression that was just... assessing. Like we were all specimens under a microscope and you were taking notes for a research paper."

She smiled, clearly meaning it as reassurance. Reaching across the table to touch his hand briefly. "But now I know you, so it's fine. It's a good thing, actually. It means you're paying attention. It means you care. It means you notice things other people miss. That's valuable. That's what makes you good at what you do."

Vox smiled back, but his mind was racing. She'd noticed. From the very beginning, she'd picked up on something wrong with him. Something that didn't match. But she'd rationalized it. Had convinced herself it was intensity, passion, dedication rather than what it actually was: the poorly fitted mask of a man who'd spent decades in Hell and was struggling to remember how to pretend to be human.

The validation was intoxicating. Someone had seen underneath and he hadn't been immediately exposed. Had been able to redirect her perception, to channel her intuition into something that served him rather than endangered him.

If he could fool Margaret's instincts, he could fool anyone's.

"Anyway," Margaret continued, apparently unaware of the psychological spiral she'd just triggered. "He asked for you. I told him you were busy getting chewed out by Sterling."

"I'm sure he enjoyed that." The bitterness slipped into Vox's voice before he could stop it.

"He seemed surprised, actually. Asked what you'd done. I didn't really want to say, it felt like gossip, but Paul... You know Paul from sports? Well Paul overheard and, well, you know how he is."

Vox nodded. He knew Paul. Everyone knew Paul. The man treated silence like a personal challenge to overcome.

"He couldn't help himself." Margaret rolled her eyes, the gesture carrying real exasperation. "He butted into the conversation before I could even finish my sentence and told Alastor the whole story about previous night's broadcast. And I mean the whole story. Every detail. How the audio died right in the middle of Chuck's sentence, how you were the one who just jumped in and anchored the segment without any preparation or notes or even a moment to collect yourself. He made it sound like an action movie. Very dramatic. Used sound effects and everything. I'm pretty sure he used the word 'explosive' at least three times."

Something cold was beginning to form in Vox's stomach. A suspicion. A horrible, creeping realization that was trying to surface but that he was desperately pushing back down.

"And what did Alastor say?" His voice came out too unstable for his liking.

"He asked a few questions. Very specific ones, actually. What exactly went wrong with the audio. Whether you had formal training in broadcast journalism. How long you'd been with the station." Margaret was almost done with her yogurt now, speaking between bites. "He seemed impressed, I think? Or maybe just curious. He said something like 'a man of many talents' in that strange way he talks. Then he asked when he could find you."

The cold in Vox's stomach had spread to his chest. Was moving through his veins like ice water, making his fingers numb.

The cafeteria noise faded out. The conversations, the clattering dishes, the scraping chairs, all of it became distant. Muffled. Like someone had wrapped his head in cotton.

He was doing math. Timeline reconstruction. Piecing together the sequence of events with horrible, crystalline clarity.

The memory played back in his head with excruciating detail. Every word. Every expression. Every microreaction.

"So. Where's my congratulations?"

"I already complimented your eagerness."

"Not for that. For the broadcast. Yesterday evening. The whole breakout moment."

"Broadcast?"

The confusion on Alastor's face. The polite bewilderment. The head tilt like he genuinely had no idea what Vox was talking about.

"You don't watch television at all, do you?"

"If I can help it, no. A vulgar medium."

And then, after Vox had explained, after he'd stood there, describing his accomplishment, waiting for praise, desperate for acknowledgment...

"That's wonderful for you, Vincent. Congratulations on your advancement."

The patronizing tone. The dismissive approval. Like a parent praising a child for finger painting.

And then, the final twist of the knife.

"So when is your next broadcast? Perhaps I could tune in."

He'd treated Vox like a child showing off a drawing. "That's wonderful, dear. Did you make that all by yourself? How special."

And Vox had played right into it. Had explained everything, seeking approval, needing acknowledgment, proving once again that he was exactly what Alastor had always said he was.

The humiliation hit harder than the dollar bill had.

Because the dollar was about money, about compensation, about the practical mechanics of their arrangement.

This was about perception. About psychological manipulation. About Alastor demonstrating, once again, that he could see right through Vox's performances. Could identify exactly what buttons to push to make him reveal himself.

And to think he considered offering...

Vox's fork clattered against his plate, the sound sharp enough to make Margaret flinch.

She looked up, startled. Her eyes were wide with concern. "Vincent?"

He was already standing. The chair scraped backward with a harsh screech that cut through the cafeteria noise and caused several nearby conversations to pause. People turned to look, curious about the source of the disturbance.

"I have to go." The words came out stiffly. He could hear just how wrong it sounded.

Margaret looked up, concerned. "Vincent? Did I say something wrong?"

"No. I just remembered. I have inventory to check. Weather equipment. It's... time sensitive."

The lie was terrible but he couldn't stay here. Couldn't sit in this chair pretending everything was fine while the full weight of this morning's humiliation came down on him.

He grabbed his tray, barely registering what he was doing. Walked to the collection area. Dumped everything. The gray meatloaf slid off the plate into the trash with a wet splat that matched how he felt internally.

He walked out of the cafeteria, moving on autopilot. Through the hallway with its fluorescent lights that suddenly seemed too bright, too harsh, stabbing into his eyes. Past the newsroom entrance where he could hear Sterling's voice raised about something, the words indistinct but the anger clear. Past the supply closet where someone was restocking paper, the smell of fresh cardboard and ink.

Past the water cooler.

He stopped.

Stared at it. The metal fountain with its button dispensers and drip tray. The spot where Alastor had stood that morning, asking innocent questions, gathering information. Setting up

his performance for later.

Vox could picture it perfectly. Paul talking too fast, too loud, gesticulating wildly while describing the broadcast crisis. Margaret trying to be diplomatic, to not gossip too much. And Alastor standing there with that pleasant smile, asking such specific questions, extracting exactly the information he needed to make Vox look like a fool later.

His hands clenched into fists at his sides. The impulse to break something was overwhelming. To put his fist through the wall, to kick over the water cooler, to do something violent and visible that would prove he wasn't helpless, wasn't controlled, wasn't dancing to anyone's tune.

But he couldn't. Because that's what they expected. What they wanted. The emotional reaction that proved he was unstable, unprofessional, unsuited for anything beyond pointing at weather maps. The loss of control that would justify everything they already thought about him.

Fine, he thought, staring at the water cooler like it might have answers. *You want a show? I'll give you a show.*

He walked back to his desk, sat down in his chair and pulled out a sheet of paper. Picked up the phone.

The office around him continued its normal rhythm. Typewriters clacking. Phones ringing. People moving between desks with papers and files. The mundane machinery of a television station operating exactly as it always did.

But Vox was no longer part of that machinery. He was somewhere else.

He fed a nickel into the payphone down the hall and dialed the number he'd memorized from the project folder.

It rang three times before someone picked up.

"Hello?" David's voice was groggy. Exhausted. The voice of someone who'd been working around the clock and had just managed to fall asleep.

"It's Vincent. I need the specifications."

There was a pause. A rustle of fabric as David presumably sat up. "They're not done yet. I told you two weeks-"

"I need them now." Vox's voice was flat, leaving no room for negotiation or discussion. The voice he used to use in Hell when issuing orders that weren't really orders but commands. “I don’t care if it’s preliminary or unfinished. Diagrams, notes, whatever you have. I need something physical, something I can point to as proof of progress.”

There was a long pause on the other end. The sound of David breathing, processing, probably looking at his notes, at his half finished schematics, at the components scattered across his workspace.

"Are you... okay?" David sounded genuinely concerned, as if he had heard something in Vox's voice that worried him. "You-"

"I'm fine." Vox cut him off. "Can you meet me? Today, in the evening?"

"Today? Vincent, it's barely been a week. I've been working nonstop but the thermal calculations alone require-"

"I'll pay you double." Vox's voice was still flat. Still controlled. But with an undercurrent of something sharp. "Triple. Whatever you want. Name your price. But I need to see progress today. I need something I can show to the client. Something that proves this isn't just theoretical bullshit."

Another pause. Longer this time. Vox could practically hear David thinking. Weighing the offer against the impossibility of what was being asked.

"There's a park near my place," David said finally. His voice was resigned. He sounded like he just agreed to something he knew he'd regret but couldn't refuse. "Riverview, off 8th Street. I can be there at seven with what I have so far. But it's rough, okay? It's not presentation ready. The schematics are hand drawn and half the component specifications are still theoretical. I haven't even verified half of these calculations. This could all be garbage. No need to pay extra, just be ready to be disappointed."

"That's fine." Vox's grip on the phone receiver was tight enough to hurt. "Seven o'clock. Bring everything you have."

"Vincent listen..."

"Seven o'clock, David. Don't be late."

Vox hung up before David could ask more questions. Before he could express more concern or try to talk sense into him or suggest that maybe rushing this wasn't the smart strategic move.

Because it *wasn't* the smart strategic move. It was impulsive. The decision made by someone who wasn't thinking clearly. Who was letting emotion override calculation. Who was reacting instead of planning.

But Vox didn't care.

If Alastor wanted to treat this like a joke, Vox would deliver the punchline. Would walk into that radio station with proof of his competence. Would ram those specifications down Alastor's throat hard enough to choke. Would force acknowledgment whether Alastor wanted

to give it or not. And he would make sure Alastor understood that Vox was the one with the project in his palm, and he could take it away as easily as deliver it.

Chapter 30

The park bench was damp.

Vox could feel the moisture seeping through his coat, through his pants, straight into his skin. The wood had absorbed last night's rain and this morning's sleet and probably several days' worth of accumulated urban grime. Sitting on it felt like voluntarily choosing discomfort, but standing would have been worse. Would have made him look anxious. Impatient. Would have revealed the nervous energy thrumming through his system like electricity through badly insulated wires.

So he sat and waited, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, his breath misting in the cold air.

The sky was darkening into particular shade of gray purple that suggested snow was coming, or freezing rain, or some other meteorological punishment the city was about to inflict on its inhabitants. The kind of sky that made you want to stay inside with the lights on and the radiator cranking. The kind that made the outdoors feel actively hostile to human presence.

The park itself was nearly empty, as anyone with sense had sought shelter hours ago. A few people hurried through on their way to somewhere warmer, their heads down against the wind, collars turned up. A dog walker with three animals on tangled leashes, the dogs pulling in different directions while the walker struggled to maintain control. A homeless man sleeping on a bench further down, covered in newspapers, either unconscious or just so resigned to his circumstances that the cold didn't matter anymore.

Slush covered the ground in uneven patches, that half-melted gray mixture of snow and dirt and salt that characterized winter in the city. It had frozen overnight, then partially thawed during the day, then frozen again, creating a treacherous landscape of ice and mud where every step required careful attention unless you wanted to end up on your ass.

Vox checked his watch. Five minutes past seven. David was late.

Not very late. Only five minutes. But the cold made every minute feel longer, made waiting feel like a punishment he was enduring for some unnamed crime. His feet had gone numb first, the sensation in his toes gradually disappearing until he wasn't entirely sure they were still attached. Then his hands, despite being shoved in his pockets. The cold was pervasive, seeping through every layer of clothing.

Footsteps approached from his left. Quick but unsteady,

David appeared around the corner of the path, hunched against the cold, clutching a manila envelope against his chest like it contained state secrets. He looked terrible. Worse than he'd looked at the diner, which was saying something. The dark bags under his eyes had deepened into full bruises, suggesting not just lack of sleep but multiple consecutive sleepless nights. His collar was stained with ink, the kind that came from bending over schematics for hours without noticing when the pen leaked. His hair was greasy, unwashed, sticking up at odd angles. There was what looked like coffee stains on his shirt, and his shoes were untied.

He looked like exactly what he was: a genius who'd been burning himself out on a project that had consumed every waking moment for the past week. Who'd sacrificed sleep and food and basic hygiene in pursuit of an engineering challenge that shouldn't have been possible.

"Sorry I'm late." David's voice was hoarse. "The subway was delayed. Signal problems. Then I had to double back because I forgot the material specifications and I figured you'd want those."

"Don't worry about it." Vox gestured to the other end of the bench, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice. "Sit. Please."

David sat heavily, the movement graceless. He set the envelope on the bench between them with careful reverence, like it might explode if handled incorrectly. His hands were shaking slightly, probably from cold and exhaustion.

"It's done," he said simply, his voice carrying a mixture of pride and disbelief. "I mean, it's not completely done. But it's done enough. The core design is finished. Complete specifications, material requirements, assembly instructions. Even troubleshooting protocols for when things inevitably go wrong because they always go wrong."

Vox picked up the envelope. It was thick, heavy with paper. The weight of it was satisfying, substantial. Evidence of actual work completed, actual progress made.

He opened it carefully, his cold fingers fumbling slightly with the clasp. Pulled out the stack of papers inside.

The first page was a title sheet. "Portable High-Voltage Power Supply - Final Specifications." Written in David's precise engineering hand, the letters perfectly uniform despite the obvious exhaustion he must have been feeling when he wrote it.

The second page was a schematic.

Vox stared at it, his brain automatically parsing the information despite the cold and the rage and the exhaustion. Tracing the signal paths with his eyes. Following the power flow from input to output. Understanding the elegant simplicity of the design hidden beneath its apparent complexity.

It was beautiful. Genuinely, objectively beautiful in the way that good engineering always was. Every component precisely specified. Every connection optimized for minimal loss and maximum efficiency. Every decision justified by the mathematics written neatly in the margins in David's careful handwriting.

A stabilized, high-voltage power supply compact enough to fit in a briefcase. Using vacuum tube technology but arranged in configurations that wouldn't exist in commercial products for another decade at least. The phantom load theory that Vox remembered vaguely from his future, implemented here with materials and components available in this decade.

"It shouldn't work," David said quietly. "The heat dissipation alone should melt the casing. The thermal load is insane. We're talking temperatures that would literally destroy most of the components I'm specifying. But if you use the ceramic compounds you mentioned, the ones that you say exist but that aren't commercially available yet..."

He trailed off, shaking his head slowly. His eyes were unfocused, probably seeing equations and calculations instead of the park around them.

"Then it works. I ran the calculations six different ways. Built a partial prototype to test the thermal management, just the power regulation stage without the high-voltage components. It works. It shouldn't, but it does. The physics say it's impossible but the math says it's not only possible but optimal. It's like you pulled the design out of the future."

Vox ignored the last comment, turning to the next page. More schematics, these showing detail views of specific subsystems. Detail drawings of the chassis with precise measurements and tolerances. Material specifications listing ceramics and alloys that technically existed but weren't widely used yet, that most engineers wouldn't even know were available. Assembly sequences showing exactly how everything fit together, in what order, with what tools.

"The component sourcing is going to be tricky," David continued, his voice monotone with exhaustion. "Half of these parts aren't in standard catalogs. I've made notes about suppliers who might have access to military or aerospace surplus. That's where you're going to find the ceramics and some of the specialized alloys. It's not going to be cheap."

"Cost isn't a concern." Vox's voice was distracted, his attention absorbed by the schematics. By the proof of his vision made real. By evidence that he wasn't crazy, wasn't delusional, wasn't just a weatherman with delusions of competence.

This was his ticket.

He wasn't a hobbyist. Wasn't some weatherman playing with ideas he didn't understand. He was the architect of the impossible. The visionary who could take concepts from the future and make them real in the present. Who could look at the limitations of current technology and say "that's not good enough" and then actually do something about it.

The cold rage that had been simmering in his chest since the cafeteria revelation surged up, hot and immediate despite the freezing temperature. The memory of Alastor's condescension. The dollar bill. The "hobby" comment. The theatrical performance of ignorance designed to make Vox look desperate and foolish. The casual cruelty wrapped in sophisticated vocabulary and that constant fucking smile.

He'd been planning to wait until Monday. He was going to deliver the specifications during business hours, in a professional manner, with proper scheduling and advance notice. The smart play, the strategic move, the kind of decision a rational person would make.

But looking at this brilliance, this proof of his competence laid out in perfect engineering notation, the idea of waiting even one more second felt intolerable. It felt like accepting yet another defeat. Like allowing Alastor one more night of thinking he'd won. One more night of that smug satisfaction.

He was going to show this off. Right now. Tonight. Was going to force him to acknowledge it, to take it seriously, to understand that Vincent Whittman was not some disposable contractor worth one dollar a week and patronizing amusement.

"This is excellent work, David." Vox carefully slid the papers back into the envelope, his movements precise despite the cold making his fingers clumsy. "Better than I expected, honestly. You've earned every cent of what I'm paying you. Triple that, considering the timeline."

David's exhausted face managed a small smile, the expression almost painful in its gratitude. "Just glad it's done. Or mostly done. There's still optimization work, testing protocols to develop, failure mode analysis... but the core is solid. I can finally sleep."

"Get some rest." Vox stood, the sudden movement making his head spin slightly from the cold and the adrenaline. "I'll be in touch next week about phase two. We'll need to start on the transmitter component soon, but take a few days. You've earned it."

They shook hands, David's grip weak from exhaustion. He shuffled away toward the subway entrance, moving like a zombie. Vox watched him go for a moment, then turned and started walking in the opposite direction.

Toward the radio station. Toward confrontation. Toward forcing acknowledgment whether Alastor wanted to give it or not.

The envelope felt heavy in his hands with potential. With leverage. With proof that he was exactly what he claimed to be.

The cold air bit at his face as he walked, but he barely felt it. The rage was keeping him warm. Burning through his veins like alcohol, heating him from the inside out.

He walked faster, his footsteps crunching through the frozen slush. The streets were darker now, the sun having set while he was waiting in the park. The streetlamps cast pools of yellow light that seemed to make the darkness between them even darker by contrast. The city felt hostile, aggressive, like it was trying to drive everyone indoors.

But Vox pushed through it. Ignored the cold and the dark and the wind that was picking up, making his coat flap around him. His destination was clear. His purpose was clear. Everything else was just noise.

The radio station appeared ahead, its windows glowing with warm light. The building looked almost inviting from a distance, like a beacon of civilization in the frozen darkness. But Vox knew better. Knew what was inside.

He didn't slow down as he approached. Didn't pause to reconsider or plan or think through the implications. Just walked straight to the door, pulled it open, and stepped inside.

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The radio station was quiet.

Most of the staff worked throughout the day. Evenings were skeleton crew only, the bare minimum needed to keep broadcasts running and make sure the equipment didn't catch fire. The lobby was empty when Vox pushed through the doors. No receptionist sitting at the desk. No executives rushing between meetings. No busy traffic of people with important business.

Just silence and the distant hum of equipment running somewhere in the building's guts. The heating system clanking and groaning as it fought against the cold outside. The faint sound of a radio playing somewhere, probably whoever was manning the evening shift.

Barbara's switchboard station was dark. Her chair empty, pushed in neatly to the desk. The cables hung neat and organized, waiting for the morning when she'd return and plug the station back into the outside world. Everything in its place. Everything proper.

Vox walked past without slowing. He knew where he was going. Had memorized the layout during his previous visits, had walked these hallways in his mind a dozen times while lying awake in his apartment.

Down the hallway with its peeling paint and stained walls. Past the quiet offices where the doors were closed and locked, the rooms dark inside. Up the stairs to the second floor, his footsteps echoing in the stairwell. Through the corridor with its flickering fluorescent lights that needed replacing.

To Alastor's office door.

He didn't knock.

Didn't pause to consider what he was doing. Didn't give himself time to second guess or reconsider or chicken out. Didn't let the rational part of his brain that was screaming about consequences and professional boundaries and the complete insanity of what he was about to do gain any traction.

He grabbed the handle and shoved the door open with enough force that it bounced off the doorstop with a bang that echoed down the hallway. The sound was violent, aggressive, completely at odds with the quiet that had filled the building moments before.

Alastor jumped, his body jerking in the chair, his teacup rattling in its saucer with a sharp clink. He'd been reading a book, his posture relaxed, one ankle crossed over his knee. His evening leisure interrupted by sudden intrusion, disturbing his reading time where the world was supposed to be quiet and controlled.

For a fraction of a second, his expression was pure surprise. Eyes wide. Mouth slightly open. The mask completely dropped, revealing something underneath that looked almost human. Vulnerable. Caught off guard.

Then it slammed back into place. The surprise vanished, replaced by mild irritation. The expression of someone whose newspaper reading had been interrupted by an inconsiderate neighbor. The persona reconstructing itself in real time.

"Vincent." His voice was controlled but carried an edge underneath that hadn't been present during any of their previous meetings, something sharp that suggested he was less amused than the expression on his face tried to convey. "I believe the concept of 'business hours' eludes you. This is twice now. And knocking, apparently. Were you raised in a barn? Did no one teach you basic courtesy?"

Vox didn't answer. Didn't slow down. Didn't acknowledge the questions or the implied criticism. Just strode forward with deliberate, aggressive purpose, his footsteps loud on the floor.

He slammed the manila envelope down onto the mahogany desk.

The impact was violent. The envelope slid across the polished surface with a harsh scraping sound that probably left marks in the wood, hitting Alastor's tea saucer with a dangerous clink that sloshed liquid over the rim. A few drops of tea spattered onto the previously pristine wood, dark stains spreading across the perfect surface.

"It's done." Vox's voice was flat. No friendliness. No professional courtesy. No attempt whatsoever to maintain the pleasant fiction that they were colleagues with mutual respect. "The power supply specifications. Ready for fabrication. Everything you asked for and more."

He leaned forward, both hands planted on the desk, looming over Alastor's seated position. Invading his space. Using his height advantage. Making himself a physical presence that couldn't be ignored or dismissed.

"Half the size of anything RCA has on the market. Twice the output. Better thermal management. Lower voltage ripple. Efficiency ratings that shouldn't be possible with current component technology. It's a miracle by all means. A technical achievement that shouldn't be possible with vacuum tubes. And I delivered it in under two weeks."

His hands pressed harder into the desk, his weight forward. The aggressive posture of someone who'd come here for confrontation, not conversation.

"Not a hobby. Not a side project. Professional engineering that's years ahead of the industry standard. I did that. I found the engineer. I designed the architecture. I managed the project. I made the impossible possible while you just sat here and played jazz or whatever you do."

Alastor set his book down carefully, marking his place with a leather bookmark. His movements were deliberate, slow, like he was buying time to process what was happening. To recalculate his approach. To figure out how this script had suddenly changed.

Then he reached for the envelope. Pulled it toward him with that same deliberate slowness. Opened it with precise movements. Extracted the papers inside.

His eyes moved across the first schematic with the focused intensity of someone who actually understood what they were looking at. Who could parse the technical notation and follow the circuit paths and appreciate the elegance of the design. Who knew enough to recognize when something was genuinely innovative versus merely competent.

His eyebrows rose slightly. Just a fraction of an inch. The only outward sign of his reaction, but Vox knew him well enough to read it. Surprise, recognition and possibly even respect, though that might have been wishful thinking.

"Efficient," he said finally. His tone was measured, professional. Giving nothing away. "And surprisingly rapid. I'm impressed by the timeline, certainly. This level of technical detail in such a short period suggests either remarkable competence or remarkable corners being cut. I wouldn’t presume to guess which.”

He started to put the papers back in the envelope. Started to close it. Started to move on like this was just another transaction, just another deliverable received and catalogued and filed away for future reference. Like Vox was a courier who'd dropped off a package and could now be dismissed.

Vox's hand slammed down on the desk. Flat palm. Hard enough to make the teacup jump in its saucer with a sharp clink. Hard enough to make the sound echo in the quiet office. Hard enough that Alastor paused mid motion, his hands stilling on the envelope.

"No." Vox's voice was low. The voice he used to use back home when someone had pushed him too far and was about to discover exactly what that meant. "We're not moving on. We're not filing this away. We're not doing the polite professional thing where we both pretend that morning didn't happen."

He leaned even further forward, his face now inches from Alastor's. Close enough to see the individual flecks in his eyes. Close enough to feel the heat of his breath. Close enough that there was no way to ignore him or dismiss him or treat him like background noise.

"We need to talk."

"About what, exactly?" Alastor's tone was patient, carefully controlled. The voice of someone humoring a difficult child. The voice of someone who was still trying to maintain the polite fiction that this was a normal conversation between reasonable people.

That patience, that condescension, that tone, snapped something in Vox.

The masks fell away. Vincent the nervous weatherman. Vox the confident overlord. All the careful performances he'd been maintaining for weeks, all the different faces he wore depending on the audience. Gone, burned away by rage that had been building since the cafeteria revelation. Since the morning's water cooler performance. Since the dollar bill. Since every accumulated humiliation condensed into this single moment.

"About you treating me like shit!" The words came out harsh, loud, bouncing off the office walls with violent clarity. "About the dollar bill. About the 'hobby' comments. About you

playing dumb about the broadcast so you could watch me explain myself like some desperate idiot begging for validation! About every fucking game you've been playing since the moment we met!"

His hands pressed so hard into the wood that his knuckles were white. His whole body vibrating with barely controlled rage.

"I am building you a weapon. Do you understand that? I am risking my career, my reputation, my neck to give you an advantage that doesn't exist in this century. Technology that's years ahead of anything commercial. *I* found the engineer. *I* designed the architecture. *I'm* managing the project. *I'm* coordinating suppliers and sourcing components and solving problems that shouldn't have solutions. *I'm* the reason this exists. Me. Not you. Not your money. Not your connections. *Me*."

His voice dropped to an even lower register, each word deliberate and sharp. "And you treat me like a beggar. Like I should be grateful you're even acknowledging my existence. The one dollar check? The dismissive comments? The performances designed to make me look stupid? The pretending you didn't know about the broadcast just so you could watch me explain it like some performing monkey?"

He straightened slightly, his hands still planted on the desk. His chest heaving with the effort of controlling his breathing.

"What is your problem? What did I even do to you? Is this just how you treat everyone, or am I special? Do you enjoy being a prick, or is there a strategy I'm missing here? Because from where I'm standing, you've been going out of your way to humiliate me since day one, and I want to know why. What's the fucking point?!"

The silence that followed was absolute.

The heating system had stopped its clanking. The distant radio had gone quiet. Even the ambient hum of the building seemed to have paused, like the structure itself was holding its breath.

Alastor stared at him. His expression was unreadable. Not angry, or defensive. Not even particularly surprised, really.

Then, slowly, a sound bubbled up from his chest.

A chuckle. Small at first. Soft and dry. Then growing slightly, though not quite reaching the level of actual laughter. More like the sound of someone discovering something unexpectedly amusing. The sound of genuine surprise mixed with something that might have been disbelief or might have been delight.

"My dear Vincent." Alastor's voice carried genuine mirth mixed with something that might have been pity. "You are remarkably thin skinned. Astonishingly so, really. I've met children who handle criticism with more grace."

The words landed like a slap.

Vox felt himself bristle immediately. His spine straightened. His jaw clenched. His hands curled into fists on the desk. The immediate, defensive impulse to prove he wasn't thin skinned, that he was exactly as cool headed and unaffected as Alastor seemed to think he should be. To demonstrate that he could take whatever was dished out without flinching.

But he didn't say anything. Didn't defend himself, or launch into justifications or explanations or demonstrations of how thick his skin actually was. Just stood there, rigid, breathing hard, waiting for Alastor to continue. Waiting to see where this was going.

Alastor leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers together across his stomach. The gesture was relaxed, casual. Like they were discussing the weather instead of Vox's barely controlled rage. Like this was all perfectly normal. A pleasant evening chat that had gotten slightly heated.

"I assure you," Alastor said, his tone taking on the patient quality of someone explaining color to a blind man. The voice of a teacher dealing with a particularly slow student. "No insult was intended. It was merely... levity. A bit of theatrical absurdity to lighten the mood. A joke, Vincent. Surely you understand the concept of humor?"

He tilted his head slightly, studying Vox.

"You seemed so tense during our last meeting. So desperately wound up about some perceived slight. So clearly spiraling into anxiety about hierarchy and validation and whether you were being taken seriously. I thought a little joke might ground you. Provide some perspective. Remind you not to take yourself quite so seriously. To relax and enjoy the absurdity of existence rather than treating every interaction like it's a referendum on your worth as a human being."

Vox stared at him. His brain was trying to process what he was hearing. Trying to reconcile the deliberate humiliation of that one dollar bill with the concept of "levity." Trying to understand how psychological manipulation could be reframed as friendly humor meant to ease tension.

"The juxtaposition, you see." Alastor's smile widened, his eyes crinkling at the corners with apparent genuine amusement. Like he was explaining a particularly clever idea and was pleased with his own wit. "A revolutionary technical vision that could transform the entire broadcast industry... and a singular dollar bill. It's ironic. Droll. The contrast between the magnitude of the achievement and the absurdity of the compensation. It's funny, Vincent. Or it should be, to anyone with a functioning sense of humor."

He spread his hands, the gesture indicating this should be obvious. That anyone with even basic social awareness would have understood immediately that this was playful rather than cruel.

"Perhaps I overestimated your capacity for irony. I sometimes forget that not everyone shares my particular sense of humor. Not everyone appreciates the theatrical. The absurd."

Vox's mouth opened. Closed. Opened again. His brain was short circuiting, unable to form coherent responses to what he was hearing.

"Humor?" The word came out flat. Like he was testing it, seeing if it would make more sense when spoken aloud.

"Of course." Alastor picked up his teacup carefully, navigating around the spilled drops, taking a small sip. His movements were precise, controlled, utterly unbothered by Vox's reaction. "Wit is the spice of life, Vincent. Without it, we're just animals eating each other. All violence and no style. How dreadfully boring. How utterly pedestrian. What separates us from beasts if not our ability to laugh at the absurdity of our circumstances?"

Vox's internal monologue had screeched to a halt. This was somehow worse than if Alastor had just been deliberately cruel.

Because cruelty he understood. Cruelty had logic. Cruelty had purpose, had goals, had reasons behind it even if those reasons were selfish or sadistic. Cruelty was a weapon you wielded with intent.

But this? This casual dismissal of his rage as "thin skinned overreaction"? This reframing of deliberate humiliation as friendly banter that Vox was simply too unsophisticated to appreciate?

"You know what?" The words came out quiet. Eerily calm after the explosion. "Fuck you."

He reached for the envelope.

Chapter 31

The book was finally getting interesting.

Alastor had been reading the same murder mystery for three evenings now, savoring it the way one should savor good literature. The detective had just discovered the crucial clue hidden in the victim's correspondence, and the author's prose was managing to be both economical and evocative. A rare combination in modern fiction.

His office was warm, quiet. The heating system provided its usual rhythmic clanking, a familiar percussion that had become white noise over the months. His tea was the perfect temperature, having cooled from scalding to merely hot. The desk lamp cast a pleasant circle of light that didn't quite reach the corners of the room, creating the kind of intimate atmosphere he preferred for evening reading.

The evening shift was always his favorite time at the station. No bustling producers. No sales representatives trying to sell him advertising packages he didn't want. No executives dropping by to "touch base" about ratings or audience demographics. Just him, his office, his records, and blessed solitude.

The door slammed open.

The bang echoed through the quiet hallway like a gunshot. Alastor's body jerked involuntarily, his teacup rattling in its saucer. Hot liquid sloshed dangerously close to the rim. The book nearly slipped from his fingers.

For a fraction of a second, less than a heartbeat, his mind went completely blank. Not the controlled neutrality he cultivated during performances. Actual emptiness. The cognitive equivalent of white noise.

Then training kicked in. Years of maintaining composure under pressure, of never letting the mask slip, of always being in control. His expression smoothed. The surprise vanished,

replaced by mild irritation. The performance reconstructing itself with practiced speed.

Vincent stood in the doorway.

He looked terrible. His coat was damp, his hair disheveled. His face was flushed, either from cold or anger or both. His eyes had that particular intensity that suggested he'd crossed several lines from rational thought into something more volatile.

"Vincent." Alastor kept his voice level, controlled. Let just enough irritation through to communicate displeasure without escalating. "I believe the concept of 'business hours' eludes you. This is twice now. And knocking, apparently. Were you raised in a barn? Did no one teach you basic courtesy?"

Vincent didn't answer. Didn't slow down. Didn't acknowledge the questions.

He just strode forward with deliberate, aggressive purpose.

Alastor's fingers tightened slightly on his book. His eyes tracked Vincent's movement with the focused attention one might give to a wild animal entering one's personal space.

Vincent slammed something onto the desk.

The manila envelope hit the polished wood with violent force. It scraped across the surface. Alastor winced internally at the sound, imagining scratches in the finish he'd maintained so carefully. The envelope collided with his tea saucer. Liquid sloshed over the rim, dark drops spattering across the previously pristine surface.

"It's done." Vincent's voice was flat. No warmth or professional courtesy. Nothing but barely controlled rage. "The power supply specifications. Ready for fabrication. Everything you asked for and more."

He leaned forward, both hands planted on Alastor's desk.

Alastor felt his spine press back into his chair involuntarily. The movement was minute, barely perceptible, but it was there. His body responding to proximity and aggression before his conscious mind could override it.

Vincent was looming, making himself a physical presence that couldn't be ignored.

"Half the size of anything RCA has on the market. Twice the output. Better thermal management. Lower voltage ripple. Efficiency ratings that shouldn't be possible with current component technology. It's a miracle by all means. A technical achievement that shouldn't be possible with vacuum tubes. And I delivered it in under two weeks."

His weight was forward, his posture aggressive. The kind of body language that preceded violence in Alastor's experience. The kind that made his brain start calculating distances to exits and cataloguing potential weapons.

"Not a hobby. Not a side project. Professional engineering that's years ahead of the industry standard. I did that. I found the engineer. I designed the architecture. I managed the project. I made the impossible possible while you just sat here and played jazz or whatever you do."

Alastor set his book down carefully. Marked his place with the leather bookmark. The familiar ritual gave his hands something to do, bought him seconds to think, to process, to figure out how to handle this sudden script deviation.

This wasn't how their dynamic worked. Vincent was supposed to be eager to please. Desperate for validation. Willing to accept whatever scraps Alastor chose to throw him because he needed the work, needed the connection, needed the opportunity.

This person in front of him wasn't playing that role anymore.

Alastor reached for the envelope. Pulled it toward him with deliberate slowness, maintaining the appearance of control even as his mind raced through options and responses. He opened it, pulling out the papers.

The schematic that greeted him was genuinely impressive.

His eyes moved across the circuit paths, following the signal flow. The design was elegant. The kind of engineering that solved multiple problems simultaneously rather than just addressing symptoms. The thermal management alone was innovative enough to be worth a patent.

Vincent hadn't been exaggerating. This was professional work, high quality, possibly revolutionary, depending on whether it actually functioned as specified.

His eyebrows rose slightly. The only outward acknowledgment of his surprise.

He started to put the papers back in the envelope. Started to move on with the interaction, to guide it back toward professional territory where he had firmer footing.

Vincent's hand slammed down on the desk.

The impact made the teacup jump. Made Alastor's own hands freeze mid motion. The whole thing made something primal in his brain whisper danger.

"No." Vincent's voice dropped into a register Alastor hadn't heard before. The voice of someone who'd decided that consequences didn't matter anymore. "We're not moving on. We're not filing this away. We're not doing the polite professional thing where we both pretend that morning didn't happen."

He leaned even further forward.

Alastor could see his reflection in the man's glasses. Could feel the heat radiating off him, the barely controlled energy that was looking for an outlet.

His own back pressed harder into the chair. The desk, usually a comfortable barrier that maintained appropriate distance, suddenly felt inadequate.

"We need to talk."

"About what, exactly?" Alastor kept his voice patient, suddenly sounding like someone humoring a difficult child. Buying time while his mind worked through deescalation strategies, calculating whether Vincent was actually dangerous or just posturing.

The rational part of his brain insisted this was posturing. Vincent was a weatherman. A civilian. Someone who probably hadn't thrown a punch since grade school. The aggression was theater, intimidation, an attempt to force acknowledgment through volume and proximity rather than actual threat of harm.

But the older, more primitive part of his brain wasn't listening to rational arguments. That part was focused on proximity, on the unpredictability of someone who had abandoned social norms and might abandon other restraints just as easily.

His left hand, the one not resting on the envelope, drifted casually toward the desk drawer. The movement was slight, almost unconscious. Just repositioning. Nothing obvious.

Inside that drawer, beneath the spare fountain pens and the box of stationery, was a letter opener. Heavy brass, sharp enough to open stubborn envelopes. Sharp enough for other purposes if necessary.

Not that he'd need it. Almost certainly wouldn't need it. This was just precaution. Just good sense when dealing with someone whose behavior had become erratic and unpredictable.

"About you treating me like shit!"

The words exploded out of Vincent with enough force that Alastor could almost feel them physically.

"About the dollar bill. About the 'hobby' comments. About you playing dumb about the broadcast so you could watch me explain myself like some desperate idiot begging for validation! About every fucking game you've been playing since the moment we met!"

Vincent's knuckles were white where they pressed into the wood. His whole body was vibrating. The energy had nowhere to go, building up like pressure in a boiler with a stuck valve.

"I am building you a weapon. Do you understand that? I am risking my career, my reputation, my..."

Alastor's thoughts stuttered.

Weapon?

Not a tool or a device. Not equipment or technology or advantage.

The word choice was wrong. Specifically, deliberately wrong. Vincent was supposed to think this was about competitive advantage in broadcasting. About getting a leg up on RCA. About corporate warfare fought with better transmitters and clearer signals.

So why would he call it a *weapon*?

The question bloomed in Alastor's mind, urgent and sharp, demanding immediate attention. What did Vincent know? What had he figured out? What had given it away?

But Vincent was still talking, his voice rising, his body language still aggressive, vibrating with that barely controlled energy that suggested he was seconds away from doing something monumentally stupid.

Alastor filed the question away with practiced mental discipline. Bookmarked it for later examination. Added it to the growing list of Vincent-related anomalies that didn't quite add up.

Right now, he needed to focus on deescalation. On managing the immediate threat. .

The word choice could wait. Had to wait.

Vincent straightened slightly. Still looming, but pulling back enough that Alastor could breathe properly again. Could think without the immediate pressure of proximity.

"What is your problem? What did I even do to you? Is this just how you treat everyone, or am I special? Do you enjoy being a prick, or is there a strategy I'm missing here? Because from where I'm standing, you've been going out of your way to humiliate me since day one, and I want to know why. What's the fucking point?!"

Alastor stared at him. Processing. Recalibrating. Trying to understand how they'd gotten from "polite professional arrangement" to "explosive confrontation in my office after hours."

The weatherman thought he'd been deliberately cruel. Thought the interactions had been calculated humiliation rather than... what? What had Alastor thought they were?

He'd been playing. Testing. Pushing boundaries to see where they were, to establish hierarchy, to figure out how Vincent would respond to pressure. Standard social maneuvering that he'd done a thousand times with a thousand people.

But Vincent wasn't most people. Vincent was thin skinned and proud and apparently keeping score of every perceived slight like they were mortal wounds.

The rational move would be to let this play out. To respond with cold professionalism, to refuse to engage with the emotional outburst, to maintain his position and let Vincent exhaust himself.

But there was a voice in the back of his mind, the same instinct that had kept him alive through dozens of close calls, that was telling him that this wouldn't work now. He needed to do something to deflate the tension.

Because if Vincent did something stupid, threw a punch, destroyed property, made a scene that brought security running, it wouldn't just be inconvenient. It would be *complicated*. Questions would be asked. Reports would be filed. The comfortable anonymity Alastor maintained at the station would develop cracks.

A sound bubbled up from Alastor's chest before he could stop it. A chuckle. Small, dry. The sound of genuine surprise mixed with something that might have been disbelief.

"My dear Vincent." The mirth colored his voice despite his best efforts to suppress it. "You are remarkably thin skinned. Astonishingly so, really. I've met children who handle criticism with more grace."

He watched Vincent bristle. Saw the spine straighten, the jaw clench, the hands curl into fists. The immediate, predictable defensive reaction.

Perfect. Defensiveness was manageable. It burned hot and fast and could be redirected. It was the cold, calculated fury that was dangerous.

Alastor leaned back in his chair deliberately, lacing his fingers across his stomach. Making himself relaxed, casual, completely unbothered. Demonstrating through body language that he wasn't threatened by whatever this was.

"I assure you, no insult was intended." He kept his tone patient, educational. Like he was explaining something that should have been obvious. "It was merely... levity. A bit of

theatrical absurdity to lighten the mood. A joke, Vincent. Surely you understand the concept of humor?"

The confusion on Vincent's face deepened. His mouth opened slightly. The rage was still there but now it was competing with genuine bewilderment.

Alastor pressed the advantage, his voice taking on the warm, explanatory tone he used on air when walking listeners through complex topics.

"You seemed so tense during our last meeting. So desperately wound up about some perceived slight. So clearly spiraling into anxiety about hierarchy and validation and whether you were being taken seriously. I thought a little joke might ground you. Provide some perspective. Remind you not to take yourself quite so seriously."

He watched Vincent's brain working, could practically see the gears grinding as he tried to reconcile the deliberate cruelty he'd perceived with this reframing.

The silence stretched out.

Vincent was staring at him. His expression had gone from rage to confusion to something that might have been disbelief. His hands were still planted on the desk but the aggressive lean had lessened slightly. The dangerous energy that had filled the room moments before was diffusing. Not gone, but no longer quite so immediately threatening.

"Humor?" Vincent's voice was flat. Testing the word like it might be a foreign language he'd never encountered before.

He could see Vincent's brain short circuiting in real time. The rage was still there, still simmering, but now it was tangled up with confusion and the uncomfortable suspicion that maybe he'd overreacted. That maybe he'd misread the entire situation. That maybe he was, as Alastor had suggested, simply too thin skinned to appreciate sophisticated humor.

He set the cup back down with precise care.

Alastor allowed himself a small internal moment of satisfaction. Crisis averted. Situation managed. And Vincent thoroughly destabilized in the process, which might make him easier to handle going forward.

Though there was something in Vincent's eyes, still visible beneath the confusion, that suggested this wasn't quite the victory Alastor had assumed it would be.

Vincent's expression wasn't softening. If anything, the look behind his eyes was hardening into something Alastor couldn't quite read.

"You know what?" Vincent's voice was quiet now. Eerily calm after the explosion, that felt more dangerous than the rage had been. "Fuck you."

He reached for the envelope.

Alastor's grip on the envelope tightened. For a moment, they both held it. A tug of war over a manila folder containing technical specifications.

"I'm leaving." Vincent pulled harder. "I'm taking this with me. You want your revolutionary technology? Your competitive advantage? Find another engineer. Find another project manager. Find someone else to *joke* with. Because I'm done."

He yanked the envelope free from Alastor's grip.

The turn of events was somewhat jarring. "Vincent, you're being ridiculous."

"No." Vincent stepped back from the desk. The envelope was clutched against his chest like a shield. "I'm appropriately valuing myself. Which is apparently something you're incapable of

providing. So I'm going somewhere else. Someone who'll pay me actual money, who'll treat me like a professional instead of a performer for their amusement."

He turned toward the door.

Alastor's mind raced. This was a bluff. Obviously. Vincent was too invested in the project to actually walk away. Too proud to admit defeat. Too desperate to prove himself to throw away months of work over hurt feelings. This whole thing felt blown out of proportion.

He'd storm out dramatically. Sleep on it. Realize how irrational he was being. Come back tomorrow or the next day, apologetic and ready to continue on Alastor's terms.

That's how this worked. That's how people worked. You called their bluff, they folded, and the hierarchy reasserted itself.

Vincent reached the door.

Kept walking.

Didn't pause or look back. Didn't give Alastor a chance to call him back or negotiate or smooth things over.

Alastor sat in his chair, teacup still in hand, staring at the empty doorway.

The footsteps receded down the corridor. Sharp, purposeful. Growing fainter with each second.

Alastor set down his teacup slowly, the porcelain clicking against the saucer.

The silence in his office was absolute. No footsteps returning, no door opening. No apologetic voice calling out that he'd been hasty, that they should talk, that perhaps he'd overreacted.

Just silence.

And the uncomfortable realization that Vincent had actually taken the specifications and walked away.

Alastor frowned.

This was unexpected. The weatherman had more spine than he'd credited him with. More willingness to burn bridges. More genuine conviction in his own value.

Or he was an even better performer than Alastor had realized, and this was all calculated theater designed to force exactly this moment of uncertainty.

Either way, the result was the same.

Alastor stood, his chair scraping backward.

He was standing before he consciously decided to stand. Moving toward the door before he'd calculated the optimal approach. Operating on instinct rather than strategy for the first time in longer than he could remember.

He walked to the doorway, his footsteps measured and controlled. Stood in the threshold, listening.

Nothing. The building was silent except for the heating system's usual complaints and the distant hum of equipment on the lower floors.

Alastor's hand tightened on the doorframe.

He was not accustomed to people calling his bluffs or to losing control of social interactions. Was definitely not accustomed to being left standing alone while someone else walked away on their terms.

The discomfort was sharp and immediate. Not quite anger. Anger would require caring more than he did. Not quite concern. Concern would suggest actual worry about the project's fate. It was something that felt uncomfortably close to having miscalculated.

He could let Vincent go. Could find another engineer. Could start over with someone more pliable, someone who understood their place in the hierarchy and stayed there.

But that would take time. Months, probably. And there was no guarantee he'd find someone with Vincent's particular combination of technical knowledge and apparent access to engineering concepts that shouldn't exist yet.

The project would stall and possibly die. Definitely be delayed long enough that competitors might develop similar technology first.

All because he'd made a joke that Vincent couldn't handle.

The thought irritated him more than the situation probably warranted.

Alastor turned and walked back to his desk. Sat down. Picked up his book.

Stared at the page without reading it.

This was Vincent's problem, not his. If the weatherman wanted to throw away his best opportunity over wounded pride and oversensitivity, that was Vincent's loss. Alastor had managed perfectly well before Vincent showed up with his impossible schematics. He'd manage perfectly well after.

The book's words remained incomprehensible, his eyes moving over them without processing meaning.

But it wasn't just that, was it? Alastor thought back to the strange classification of the technology as a weapon.

Did he really want someone who might be privy to far more than they admitted on the enemy's side?

He set the book down with more force than necessary.

Fine.

If Vincent wanted to play hardball, if he wanted to pretend he had leverage, if he thought walking away would force Alastor to chase after him like some supplicant begging for scraps...

Alastor stood again. Walked to his coat rack. Pulled on his coat with sharp movements.

He was not chasing. He was not begging. He was simply clarifying the terms of their arrangement. Making sure Vincent understood what he was throwing away. Ensuring there were no misunderstandings that might damage a potentially valuable professional relationship.

The cold air hit him as he stepped outside, sharp enough to sting. The street was nearly empty, most sensible people having sought shelter from the dropping temperature.

He spotted Vincent half a block ahead, walking slowly, the envelope still clutched against his chest.

Alastor followed, maintaining distance, walking with purpose, closing the gap between them at a measured pace.

Vincent's shoulders were hunched against the cold, his breath misting in the freezing air.

Alastor caught up at the corner, stepping around to block Vincent's path before he could cross the street.

"Vincent."

Vincent stopped, his expression shifting from surprised to irritated in the space of a heartbeat. "What part of 'I'm leaving' was unclear?"

"The part where you believe you have better options." Alastor kept his voice level, conversational. As if they were discussing the weather rather than the death of their working relationship. "Let's be realistic. You're a weatherman at a second rate television station. Who exactly do you think is going to pay you for revolutionary broadcast technology? Who do you think will even believe you without a working prototype?"

Vincent's eyes narrowed. "You think I don't know how impressive this technology is? Other stations would kill for this. I'll find someone."

"Perhaps. Eventually. After months of searching and countless rejections from people who'll think you're either insane or trying to sell them snake oil." Alastor adjusted his coat collar against the wind. "Meanwhile, you'll have nothing. No income from the project, no advancement and no proof of concept. Just specifications on paper and a grievance about compensation."

"Better than being your unpaid entertainment."

"I'm offering you paid work and valuable experience. Access to resources and components you couldn't source on your own." Alastor's tone remained pleasant. "What I'm not offering is coddling. If you require constant validation and careful handling of your delicate sensibilities, then yes, perhaps you should find other employment."

Vincent laughed, the sound harsh and bitter. "You're unbelievable. Even now you're trying to make this my fault. My oversensitivity. My inability to take a joke." He shook his head. "I'm done. Find someone else to condescend to."

He stepped around Alastor and kept walking.

Alastor stood on the corner, watching him go.

Let him walk away. Let him discover exactly how replaceable he actually was when no one else would take his designs seriously.

Vincent's figure was getting smaller. Disappearing into the darkness and the cold.

Alastor's jaw tightened, eyes narrowing.

This was pride talking. Wounded ego. Vincent would come around once he'd calmed down and realized Alastor was his best option. His only option, really.

The figure kept getting smaller.

Almost at the next corner now. About to turn and disappear completely.

"Three hundred." The words came out before Alastor could stop them, cutting through the cold air with more force than he'd intended.

Vincent stopped.

Didn't turn around immediately. Just stood there, his back to Alastor, breath misting in the freezing air.

"Three hundred dollars per week," Alastor continued, his voice carefully controlled now. Professional. "Full reimbursement for all component costs. Formal contract with deliverables and timeline specified."

The silence stretched. Alastor could hear his own heartbeat, could feel the cold seeping through his coat, could see his breath misting white in the lamplight.

Vincent turned around slowly.

He was smiling.

“Well,” Vincent said mildly, as if amused. “That’s more like it. What's with the sudden shift?”

The moment Alastor saw that smile, he knew it was over. Whatever ground he’d thought he was standing on had already given way beneath him.

"I'm practical." Alastor kept his tone neutral. "You've proven you can deliver results. That has value. I'm willing to compensate that value appropriately."

"And the 'jokes'?"

"Will be curtailed." The admission took considerable effort. "Whatever terms make you comfortable enough to complete the project."

Vincent walked back toward him, each step measured and deliberate. Stopped a few feet away, close enough to see Alastor's expression clearly in the lamplight.

Vincent studied him for a long moment. "If any of those terms aren't met exactly as discussed, I walk. Permanently."

"Agreed."

They shook hands. The grip was firm, professional. The handshake of equals negotiating terms.

Vincent released his hand and turned back toward the street. Started walking again, the envelope still tucked under his arm.

Alastor watched him disappear into the darkness. Waited until the footsteps faded completely. Then turned and walked back toward the station.

The cold felt sharper now. More bitter. The discomfort in his chest had intensified into something he couldn't quite name.

He'd won. Had retained the project. Had salvaged the working relationship through reasonable compromise.

But it felt uncomfortably like losing.

His office was exactly as he'd left it when he returned. The book waiting on his desk. The cold tea in its cup. The spilled drops that would need cleaning.

He sat down and tried to return to his reading.

The detective was still making his clever deductions. The prose was still evocative. But the satisfaction he'd felt earlier, the pleasure of a good mystery well told, had evaporated.

He kept seeing Vincent's face. The cold calculation as he'd named his price. The complete lack of gratitude or relief when Alastor had agreed to terms.

The weatherman had won their first real negotiation.

Chapter 32

The apartment door slammed shut with a bang that probably woke half the floor.

Vox didn't care. Didn't care about Mrs. Kowalski or Mr. Griswold or any of the other neighbors who might be cursing his name right now. Didn't care about noise complaints or courtesy or any of the social niceties that Vincent Whittman was supposed to maintain.

Because Vincent Whittman had just told Alastor to fuck off.

Had walked away with the specifications.

Had negotiated three hundred dollars a week like he was closing a corporate merger instead of begging for scraps.

The energy thrumming through his body was almost painful in its intensity. His hands were shaking. His heart was hammering against his ribs hard enough that he could feel it in his throat. The adrenaline dump from the confrontation was hitting him in waves, each one making him feel more alive than he'd felt since waking up in this timeline.

He threw his coat at the armchair. It missed, landing on the floor in a heap. He didn't pick it up.

He walked straight to the fish tank.

The two guppies were doing their usual circuit, swimming their endless circles like nothing momentous had just occurred. Like the entire power dynamic of Vox's existence hadn't just fundamentally shifted.

"You are not going to believe what just happened." His voice was too loud for the small apartment, bouncing off the walls with manic energy. "You are not going to fucking believe it."

He started pacing. Three steps to the wall. Three steps back. Too much energy to stand still. Too much triumph burning through his system to do anything but move.

"So I walk in there, right?" He was gesturing wildly now, his hands cutting through the air. "And he's sitting there with his book and his tea like some gentleman from some old timey novel. Very refined. Very civilized. Very much thinking he's in control of the situation."

He stopped pacing long enough to slam his hand down on the kitchen table. The impact made the wood creak, made his palm sting.

"And I just..." He laughed, the sound sharp and slightly unhinged. "I just let him have it. All of it. Every fucking grievance I've been swallowing for weeks. Every single humiliation he thought I was just accepting with a smile."

He resumed pacing, faster now. The smaller guppy had stopped swimming, hovering in place like it was watching him.

"You should have seen his face!" Vox spun on his heel, addressing the tank directly. "That moment when I slammed the envelope down? He looked shocked like I might actually hit him."

The memory sent another wave of satisfaction through him. Alastor, always so controlled, always so composed, actually showing genuine surprise. Actual fear, maybe, or at least wariness. The mask slipping for just a fraction of a second.

"And then!" Vox was doing the voices now, couldn't help himself. He pitched his voice up slightly, adding theatrical warmth. "'My dear Vincent, you are remarkably thin skinned.' Like it was my fault. Like I was overreacting to his *innocent* jokes."

He dropped the impression, his own voice returning with savage satisfaction. "So I told him to fuck off. Actually said those words. 'Fuck you, Alastor.' Just like that. And I grabbed the specifications and I walked out."

He paused, letting that sink in. Letting the full weight of what he'd done settle over him.

"I walked out on him. While he was still sitting there trying to figure out what just happened."

The triumph was intoxicating. Better than any drug. Better than the whiskey he'd been using to dull the torment of his new existence. This was pure validation that he wasn't just some disposable contractor who had to accept whatever treatment was offered.

He walked back to the table and sat down hard, the chair scraping against the floor.

"And then," he continued, his voice dropping slightly, becoming more thoughtful. "Then he chased me."

The memory of that was almost as good as the confrontation itself. Alastor, dignified Alastor, following him out into the cold street. Trying to block his path. Trying to negotiate. Trying to salvage the arrangement because he'd realized, finally, that Vox actually had leverage.

"He offered me three hundred dollars a week." Vox leaned back in his chair, staring at the water stained ceiling. "A formal contract. Full reimbursement for components. Everything I should have gotten from the start, handed over because he realized I was actually willing to walk away."

He closed his eyes, replaying the moment. The look on Alastor's face when Vox had stopped walking. The careful neutrality that couldn't quite hide the discomfort underneath. The handshake that had felt, for the first time, like an agreement between equals rather than a lord granting favors to a peasant.

"I won." The words came out quiet but certain. "I actually won. Changed the entire dynamic in one night. Not that it's my first time."

He opened his eyes, looking at the fish tank. The guppies had resumed their swimming, apparently deciding the show was over.

"Did you know that?" Vox said to them, leaning over. "I did the same thing to him in hell. I destroyed him. But of course he cheated his way to success. He always does."

He stood again, too energized to stay seated. Started organizing the specifications on the table, spreading them out like they were treasure maps. The schematics David had delivered. The proof of his competence. The physical evidence that he wasn't delusional or grandiose or any of the other things people had implied about him.

"He'll probably drop by tomorrow," Vox said, more to himself than the fish. "Or send someone with the formal contract. Maybe invite me to his office to discuss next steps like a professional. The dynamic has shifted. He knows it. I know it. Now we can actually work together properly."

He paused, considering. "Or maybe he'll wait until Monday. Let things cool down. Come at it fresh with a clear head and proper respect. That would be smart. Give both of us time to process what just happened and start fresh on professional footing."

The thought made him smile. Monday morning, Alastor would acknowledge what had happened. Would treat him differently. Would engage with him as an equal because he'd been forced to recognize that Vox wasn't someone who could be dismissed or condescended to.

The future was unfolding in his mind with crystal clarity. Future meetings where Alastor actually listened instead of performing superiority. Future conversations where they collaborated instead of Alastor issuing directives. Future success where they were partners building something revolutionary together.

He walked to the Murphy bed and pulled it down. Lay back on the thin mattress fully clothed, staring at the ceiling. The adrenaline was finally starting to fade, leaving behind

something warm and satisfied. The physical exhaustion of someone who'd just run a marathon and won.

Sleep came easily, for once. No tossing and turning, replaying humiliations or spiraling anxiety about whether he was making the right choices.

Just the deep, dreamless sleep of someone who'd finally taken control of their own life.

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Morning arrived with weak sunlight filtering through the grimy window.

Vox woke up still riding the high from the previous night. He lay there for a moment, expecting the satisfaction to fade the way emotions usually did overnight. Expecting reality to reassert itself and remind him that he was still Vincent Whittman, weatherman, living in a one room apartment with a leaky radiator and two fish.

But the satisfaction didn't fade. If anything, it intensified as the events replayed in his mind with the clarity that came from a full night's sleep. He really had done it.

He got out of bed with more energy than he'd had in weeks. Showered. Actually took time with his appearance instead of just going through the motions. Picked out his better shirt, and polished his shoes until they gleamed.

The man in the mirror looked different. Still pale, still tired, still wearing Vincent Whittman's unremarkable face. But there was something in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

The walk to the station felt different too. The cold air didn't bite quite as hard. The gray streets didn't seem quite as oppressive. The people hurrying past with their heads down didn't make him feel quite as insignificant.

He was walking taller. His spine had straightened, his shoulders had pulled back. The posture of someone who had nothing to apologize for.

Margaret was at her desk when he arrived, already working through a stack of correspondence. She looked up as he passed, her expression shifting from concentration to surprise.

"Vincent!" She set down her pen. "How are you doing?"

"Got a good night's sleep for once." The lie came easily. He was too keyed up to explain, and even if he wanted to, he couldn't. The project was confidential. The confrontation was private. This victory was his alone.

"Well, whatever you're doing, keep doing it." Margaret smiled, genuine and warm. "You seem less stressed."

He continued to his desk, settling into his chair with the specifications envelope placed carefully in the drawer. Within reach. Ready for when Alastor sent someone to collect them or dropped by himself to discuss next steps.

The morning passed in its usual chaos. Weather maps. Pressure systems. Sterling's distant shouting about something. The clatter of typewriters and ringing phones. All of it familiar and manageable and somehow less oppressive than it had been yesterday.

Vox found himself making eye contact with people as they passed his desk. Returning greetings instead of just nodding. Participating in the general office banter instead of treating it as background noise to be ignored or exploited.

Paul from sports stopped by mid morning with a question about the weekend forecast. They ended up chatting for ten minutes about the station's upcoming anniversary party. Vox actually engaged, made jokes, acted like a human being who enjoyed social interaction.

"You're in a good mood today," Paul observed, his tone curious but friendly. "Usually you're all business. Did you win the lottery or something?"

"Something like that." Vox kept his expression pleasant. Let people wonder.

Every time someone walked past his desk, every time the elevator dinged, every time a door opened somewhere in the building, Vox felt a small spike of anticipation. His attention would sharpen, his posture would shift slightly forward.

But the morning passed. Then lunch. Then the afternoon.

No messenger from the radio station. No phone call. No Alastor appearing in the newsroom with a formal contract and an invitation to discuss the project properly.

Just the usual office routine with its usual chaos. The usual mundane progression of a Wednesday at the station.

By three in the afternoon, the first hairline crack appeared in Vox's confidence.

He was still certain Alastor would reach out, but the timing was starting to feel off. It had been almost twenty four hours since their confrontation. Plenty of time for Alastor to have his secretary draft a formal agreement. Plenty of time to arrange a proper meeting.

Unless he was being deliberately slow, making Vox wait as a power move. Reasserting dominance through strategic delay.

The thought made Vox's jaw clench. He forced himself to relax, to maintain the pleasant expression he'd been wearing all day. Alastor was probably just busy. The radio station had its own demands, its own schedule. These things took time.

By five o'clock, when Vox packed up his things to leave, he'd convinced himself that the delay was intentional but not hostile. Just Alastor needing time to draft proper contracts, to set up appropriate meeting space, to handle this new arrangement with the professionalism it deserved.

"Tomorrow," he told the fish when he got home. "He'll reach out tomorrow. He needs time to process what happened."

He made dinner. Nothing fancy, just pasta from a box and sauce from a jar, but he actually tasted it instead of just mechanically consuming it. Cleaned up after himself. Did his evening routine with the satisfaction of someone whose life was finally moving in the right direction.

Sleep came easily again, though not quite as deeply as the night before. Some part of his brain was already calculating, already planning, already preparing for something bad.

Thursday morning arrived cold and gray.

Vox went through his routine with the same confidence as yesterday, though perhaps with slightly more edge. The anticipation was sharper now. Today would be the day. Had to be the day. Forty eight hours was a reasonable timeframe for drafting contracts and scheduling meetings.

He arrived at the station and settled at his desk, the specifications envelope once again placed carefully in the drawer.

Margaret stopped by mid morning with coffee, which she'd apparently decided was now part of their routine. "Still in a good mood?"

"Still waiting for something good to happen." The words came out before he could filter them, more honest than he'd intended.

"Well, I hope it does." She squeezed his shoulder briefly before returning to her desk.

Vox stared at his weather reports without seeing them. His attention was split, part of him going through the motions of work while the larger part stayed alert for any sign of contact from the radio station.

Lunch came and went. The afternoon crawled past with agonizing slowness. Every time the phone rang, Vox's attention snapped to it. Every time footsteps approached his desk, his posture straightened.

But nothing. No messenger, no call, and most importantly, no Alastor.

By four o'clock, the hairline cracks in his confidence had spread. His pleasant expression had become harder to maintain. The walking tall posture had developed a tension in his shoulders that was starting to ache.

He told himself rational things. Alastor was busy, the radio station was demanding. These things took time. Professional contracts required review by lawyers. Scheduling was complicated when you were coordinating between two organizations.

But underneath the rational explanations, something cold was beginning to form. A suspicion.

By the time Vox left the station at five thirty, the cold anger had fully crystallized. This wasn't about scheduling conflicts or contract review. This was Alastor reasserting control through silence. Punishing him for the confrontation by making him wait. Demonstrating that even when Vox won, Alastor still controlled the pace of engagement.

He walked home through the darkening streets, hands shoved in his pockets, jaw clenched against the cold and the fury.

"Tomorrow," he told the fish, but the word lacked conviction now. "He'll reach out tomorrow. Or maybe Monday. Give it through the weekend. These things take time."

But he didn't believe it anymore. The triumph from Tuesday night had curdled into something bitter. The satisfaction of standing his ground had been replaced by the humiliation of waiting. Of being made to wonder. Of having his victory transformed into just another game he was losing.

He went to bed angry. Woke up Friday morning still angry. Went through his routine with mechanical efficiency, the confidence from earlier in the week completely evaporated.

At work, people noticed the shift. Margaret commented that he seemed tense. Paul asked if everything was okay. Even Sterling's assistant gave him a worried look when she passed his desk.

Vox maintained the professional mask. Smiled. Assured everyone he was fine. Just tired. Just stressed about deadlines. Nothing serious.

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The envelope arrived at three fifteen on Friday afternoon.

Vox was staring at a weather map, not really seeing it, when the mail courier dropped a stack of correspondence on his desk. He sorted through it mechanically. Station memos, equipment catalogs, industry newsletters...

And one cream colored envelope with his name written in elegant script.

His heart jumped. He picked it up carefully, as if it might explode. The paper was expensive, heavy. The kind of stationery people used for important communications.

He opened it with precise movements, pulling out a single sheet of matching paper.

Mr. Whittman,

Per our discussion Tuesday evening, please find enclosed the formal contract terms for your continued work on our project. A meeting has been scheduled for Monday, at 2:00 PM in Conference Room B to review and execute the agreement.

My representative will have all necessary documentation prepared for your signature. Please bring any questions or concerns to this meeting.

Best regards,

A.

Vox read it three times. Then a fourth. Each reading made the cold in his chest spread further.

The language was impersonal. The kind of communication you'd send to a contractor you barely knew. Not someone you'd had an intense confrontation with. Not someone you'd negotiated with on a freezing street corner. Not someone who'd fundamentally shifted the power dynamic of your working relationship.

Monday afternoon. Three more days away. Not Monday morning like any reasonable person would schedule. Not even today, wrapping things up before the weekend. Five full days after their confrontation. After he'd walked out.

After he'd forced Alastor to chase him down and offer real terms.

Days of strategic silence followed by a letter that could have been written by a representative without Alastor's involvement at all.

Conference Room B. Vox didn't even know where that was. Not Alastor's office, where they could meet as equals in his space. Not even a nice conference room that suggested this was important. Just Conference Room B. It sounded like a kind of space where one handled routine business that didn't warrant personal attention.

"My representative will have all necessary documentation prepared."

The words hit hardest. Not "I will have the contracts ready." Not "We can discuss terms together." Not even "I look forward to finalizing our arrangement."

My representative will handle it.

Vox stared at the letter with the dawning realization of what this actually meant.

Alastor wasn't planning to show up.

He was going to send his representative to handle the contract signing and treat this like any routine business transaction that could be delegated to administrative staff. Was going to demonstrate that Tuesday night's confrontation hadn't changed anything at all.

Or worse. It had changed things, but not in the direction Vox had assumed.

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Conference Room B was exactly as depressing as Vox had imagined.

Small, beige, institutional. The kind of space that existed in every office building in America, interchangeable and forgettable. A table that seated six but felt cramped with four. Chairs with thin padding that had long since compressed into uselessness. Fluorescent lights that hummed at that particular frequency designed to cause headaches. A clock on the wall that ticked with aggressive loudness.

Vox arrived fifteen minutes early, which was a mistake. The extra time just gave him more opportunity to absorb the casual dismissiveness of the location choice. To sit in the uncomfortable chair and listen to the clock and feel the walls pressing in.

He'd spent the past two days convincing himself that maybe Alastor would actually show up. That the letter had been deliberately vague to avoid committing to details. That "my representative will have the documentation" didn't necessarily mean Alastor himself would be absent.

Maybe he'd arrive with his representative. Maybe he'd handle the signing himself and the representative was just backup for administrative details. Maybe this was all professional caution rather than deliberate dismissal.

The door opened at exactly two o'clock.

Vox straightened in his chair, his prepared smile already forming.

Alastor walked in first, and for a brief moment, relief flooded through Vox's chest. Then Barbara followed him in, carrying a leather portfolio that probably contained the contracts.

The relief curdled instantly.

Alastor moved to the far end of the table. As far from Vox as the small room allowed. He sat down, placing his hands flat on the table surface.

And looked at nothing. Not at Vox or at Barbara. Just at some middle distance that didn't include acknowledging anyone else's presence.

Barbara took the seat next to him, opening her portfolio with efficient movements. She smiled at Vox, flat and professional. "Good afternoon, Mr. Whittman. Thank you for meeting

with us on such short notice. I hope the timing was convenient?"

Vox's attention was locked on Alastor. Waiting for him to look up or to make eye contact. To acknowledge that they were in the same room.

Alastor adjusted his cuffs with meticulous care. Still not looking up.

"Mr. Whittman?" Barbara's voice carried gentle persistence. "Was the timing acceptable?"

Vox forced his gaze to her. "Yes. Fine. Perfectly convenient."

"Wonderful." She pulled out a document, sliding it across the table toward him. "This is the formal contract for the discussed deal. Three hundred dollars weekly, paid every Friday. Full reimbursement for components and materials, submitted with receipts. Confidentiality clauses standard for proprietary technology development. Duration of contract extends through project completion, with specific deliverables outlined in Section C."

She was talking to him like he was her only client in the room. Like Alastor wasn't even there. Professional, courteous, entirely focused on the business at hand.

Vox picked up the contract, his eyes moving over the text without processing it. His attention was still fractured, part of him trying to read the legal language while the larger part kept glancing at Alastor, waiting for him to participate. To say something. To do anything besides sit there like a decorative piece of furniture.

"The payment schedule begins next Friday," Barbara continued, pulling out another document. "And here's the reimbursement form you'll use for component purchases. Just attach receipts and submit to my desk, I'll process them within three business days."

"This seems straightforward." Vox kept his voice level, professional. Trying to mirror Barbara's tone. "The terms match what we discussed."

"Excellent. Do you have any questions about the deliverables timeline?"

"Actually," Vox set down the contract, his eyes moving to Alastor. "I wanted to discuss the integration specifications. The power supply will need to interface with whatever transmission equipment you're planning to use, and that requires coordination on the technical architecture."

He was speaking to Alastor. Making it impossible to ignore him. Forcing engagement through direct technical necessity. But Alastor's eyes stayed fixed on the middle distance. His expression was pleasant, mildly interested in nothing in particular.

Barbara's pen moved across her notepad. "That's an excellent point. If you could prepare a technical requirements document, I'll make sure it gets reviewed and we can schedule a follow up meeting to address any compatibility concerns."

Vox felt something hot and sharp twist in his chest. "I think this needs direct discussion with Alastor. The technical decisions are complex enough that working through intermediaries will just slow everything down and introduce miscommunication."

Barbara glanced at Alastor, some silent communication passing between them. Then she turned back to Vox, her smile widening. "Mr. Alastor's schedule is quite demanding. But I assure you, I'm fully authorized to coordinate all project communication. Anything you need to discuss can come through me, and I'll make sure he's kept fully informed."

"I'm sure you're very competent." Vox's voice was still controlled, but edge were starting to show. "But some technical decisions require real time discussion, not messages passed through a secretary like we're playing telephone."

"I understand your concern, Mr. Whittman." Barbara's tone was soothing, conciliatory. The voice of someone dealing with a client who was getting unnecessarily agitated. "But this arrangement is quite standard for high level contract work. Mr. Alastor oversees multiple projects simultaneously, and centralized communication helps maintain efficiency. I promise you, nothing will be lost in translation."

Vox's hands were clenched into fists under the table. The walls of the small room were pressing in. The clock's ticking was too loud. The fluorescent lights were too bright.

"Alastor." He said the name directly, forcefully. Demanding acknowledgment.

Alastor's eyes moved. Finally. They lifted from whatever fascinating nothing he'd been observing and tracked to Vox's face.

For a moment, just a fraction of a second, Vox saw the deliberate intent. The smug, cruel satisfaction of someone executing a plan perfectly.

Then the expression shifted. Alastor's head tilted slightly, his face the picture of mild confusion. "Is there something wrong? Barbara can address any concerns you might have. She's extraordinarily capable."

The tone was pleasant. The voice of someone who genuinely couldn't understand why anyone would be upset by this perfectly reasonable arrangement.

Then his eyes dropped back down. Back to examining nothing. The eye contact lasting maybe three seconds total.

Dismissed.

Vox sat frozen, his brain trying to process what had just happened. The eye contact had been worse than the ignoring. Had been confirmation that this was all deliberate. All designed to demonstrate exactly how little Tuesday night's confrontation had actually mattered.

Barbara was still talking, something about payment schedules and documentation requirements. Her voice was a pleasant buzz that Vox couldn't quite parse into words. The contract was still in front of him, the pen was still in his hand.

He signed it without thinking.

Barbara collected the documents with efficient movements, storing them back in her portfolio.

"Wonderful. I think that covers everything. You'll receive your first payment next Friday, and I'll be available by phone if any questions come up during component sourcing."

She stood, extending her hand across the table. Vox shook it automatically, his movements mechanical.

Alastor stood as well. Started moving toward the door. Still without a word. Still without a glance. His footsteps were soft on the linoleum.

He was going to leave. Was actually going to walk out of this room without saying a single word directly to Vox. Without acknowledging that Tuesday night had happened. Without engaging at all.

The door opened. Alastor stepped through, already in the hallway. Barbara followed, pausing at the threshold to smile back at Vox. "Have a wonderful afternoon, Mr. Whittman. I'll be in touch next week with the payment."

The door closed with a soft click.

Vox sat alone in Conference Room B. He realized he'd been systematically demolished, taken apart piece by piece with such efficient cruelty that he'd barely realized it was happening until it was over.

Vox stood slowly, his movements careful, picking up his coat. He walked to the door, out into the hallway. Through the building, past people who didn't notice him, down to the street.

The cold air hit his face but he barely felt it. His mind was elsewhere, replaying the meeting on loop, analyzing every moment, every deliberate choice Alastor had made.

His feet carried him through the city on autopilot. He didn't know where he was going until he found himself back at the park. The same bench where he'd met David. The same view of bare trees and frozen slush.

He sat down heavily.

He'd thought telling Alastor to fuck off was winning and walking away was power. Thought forcing negotiation was changing the dynamic.

But he could turn the situation around. He always did.

Barbara was the weak point. The vulnerability in Alastor's carefully constructed system of distance and control. She was handling all communication, which meant she was seeing all the technical specifications. Hearing all the details. Understanding, potentially, exactly what they were building and why it mattered.

That was leverage.

Vox smiled, the expression cold in the winter air.

Chapter 33

The first progress report was due Friday.

Vox sat at his kitchen table with a blank sheet of paper in front of him, a pen in his hand, and a cold certainty in his chest that had been building since Thursday's humiliation. The guppy tank bubbled softly in the corner where the smaller fish had lost most of its tail now, the fin ragged and torn from constant harassment by its larger tankmate who followed relentlessly and took small bites whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Vox watched them for a moment, then turned his attention back to the paper.

Barbara would receive this report and read every word and file it away in whatever system she used to organize Alastor's business affairs, which meant she was learning things and accumulating knowledge and becoming, whether she realized it or not, a security risk that Alastor would eventually have to address.

All Vox needed to do was make sure Alastor realized it too.

He started writing, his handwriting neat and precise in a way that felt almost meditative.

Component sourcing proceeding on schedule. Primary vacuum tubes acquired from military surplus supplier (see attached receipts). The MT-4 ceramic compound proved difficult to locate but I've identified a manufacturer in New Jersey who produces it for aerospace applications.

He paused, reading what he'd written with the critical eye of someone who'd spent decades crafting messages that said one thing on the surface while communicating something entirely different underneath. Perfectly innocuous so far, just standard project documentation that any competent engineer would produce, nothing that would raise eyebrows if read by someone with technical knowledge.

But Barbara didn't have technical knowledge, which was precisely the point.

He continued writing, his pen moving across the paper with steady confidence.

The thermal management specifications are critical here. We're operating at power densities that would normally require active cooling, but the ceramic housings allow for passive heat dissipation through radiative transfer. This is the same principle the military uses in portable field communication systems, though their applications prioritize durability over miniaturization.

Still technical and still factual, but now there was a mention of military applications slipped in like it was just casual context, the kind of comparison an engineer might make without thinking about the implications, except Vox had thought about the implications very carefully and knew exactly what kind of questions that comparison might raise in the mind of someone who was simply trying to file paperwork and wasn't expecting to be handling what sounded increasingly like classified information.

The voltage regulation circuit is performing above initial projections. We're maintaining stability within 0.5% across the full load range, which exceeds commercial broadcast standards. This level of precision is typically only required for applications where signal degradation could compromise operational effectiveness.

Operational effectiveness, not broadcast quality or professional standards or any of the normal language someone would use when discussing radio equipment, but the terminology of military operations or intelligence work or things that happened in shadows rather than on publicly licensed airwaves.

Vox set down his pen and read through what he'd written so far, imagining Barbara sitting at her desk with this report in front of her and a cup of coffee going cold while she tried to parse technical specifications that kept casually referencing military applications and operational requirements and deployment scenarios. She was competent and thorough, which meant she'd actually read this instead of just filing it away, and the more she read the more questions she'd have about what exactly she was helping to coordinate.

And if she had questions, she might ask them, might seek clarification on these technical details that seemed important, might demonstrate to Alastor that his efficient secretary was now accumulating knowledge about a project that was supposed to remain compartmentalized and controlled.

He picked up the pen again.

Final assembly and testing of the power supply prototype. Once validated, I'll begin integration planning with the transmission equipment. This will require detailed specifications on the intended deployment scenarios, environmental conditions, operational range requirements, portability constraints, etc.

Deployment scenarios again, hammering the point home without being obvious about it, just consistently using language that sounded slightly wrong for a civilian broadcasting project. Someone reading this might not be able to articulate why it felt off, but the cumulative effect of all these small word choices would create an impression of something secretive and potentially dangerous being discussed through official channels that weren't designed to handle that kind of information.

The success of the integration phase depends heavily on understanding the specific use case. Different operational requirements would necessitate different design choices in the signal path architecture. I'll need direct technical consultation on the intended application parameters to ensure optimal performance.

That last sentence was the hook, embedded in professional language but making it clear that he needed more information than he currently had, which meant either Alastor would have to provide that information himself or continue relying on Barbara to handle the communication while she accumulated more and more context about what was actually being built.

Vox leaned back in his chair, studying the report with satisfaction. To anyone with engineering expertise this would read as perhaps slightly odd in its language choices but fundamentally normal, just a competent contractor providing detailed status updates and requesting necessary information for the next phase of work. But to Barbara, who would be reading this as an administrative task while trying to coordinate between Vox and Alastor, it would sound increasingly like something she shouldn't be involved in, like she was handling documents that belonged in locked filing cabinets with restricted access rather than sitting

openly on her desk where anyone walking past might glance at them. Because on some level, she was.

The silence of the apartment was shattered by a mechanical shriek.

Vox nearly jumped out of his skin. He spun around, heart hammering against his ribs, staring at the black rotary phone on the side table.

It had never rung. Not once since he'd woken up in this timeline. He'd honestly started to assume it was disconnected, a heavy plastic prop left over from Vincent's life that served no function other than collecting dust.

The sound was relentless, physical, vibrating the small table.

Vox stared at it, a cold prickle of unease crawling up his spine. His mind flashed back to yesterday afternoon. Margaret, leaning against his desk, pen poised over her address book.

"I realized I don't have your home number," she'd said, smiling. *"In case of emergencies. Or, you know... non emergencies."*

Vox had opened his mouth to say he'd have to check, to look it up on the dial card, but he hadn't.

The numbers had just tumbled out of his mouth. A sequence of digits he had no conscious memory of. He'd recited them with the easy familiarity of someone who'd lived here for years.

He'd frozen afterwards, watching her write it down. How? How did he remember that? Was Vincent's brain leaking into his? Were the two merging? If he stayed here too long, would he forget he was ever an Overlord at all?

The fourth ring snapped him out of the existential spiral. The noise was deafening in the small room.

He crossed the distance in two strides, snatching the receiver before it could scream again.

"Hello?"

"Vincent!" Margaret's voice came through bright and cheerful, the sound of someone who'd been working up the courage to make this call and was relieved to have actually gotten through. "I'm so glad I caught you, I was worried you might be out for the evening."

The shift from strategic planning to social performance was jarring enough that Vox had to take a second to recalibrate, to switch gears from the cold calculation of psychological warfare to the warm friendliness Margaret expected of him. He forced the appropriate tone into his voice. "Margaret, no, just staying in tonight and working on some personal projects. Did you need anything?"

"Well, I know this is short notice but my parents are having a small dinner party tomorrow night, nothing fancy, just some family friends, and they specifically asked if you could come." She paused and he could hear the slight nervousness creeping into her voice, the awareness that she was asking him to give up his Saturday evening for her family's benefit. "Mother was very insistent that I invite you, I think she's decided you're good for me."

Vox closed his eyes and felt every instinct scream at him to refuse, to claim illness or work obligations or literally anything that would get him out of spending his Saturday evening making small talk with the Holloways and their friends while pretending to be the kind of stable, respectable young man who was worthy of their daughter's affection. He had planning to do, had strategies to refine, had no time or energy for performances that didn't directly serve his primary objectives.

But Margaret was still useful in ways he couldn't afford to discard, and her parents' approval was still necessary for maintaining the facade that made his life at the station manageable, and pulling away now would raise questions he didn't want to answer about why Vincent Whittman was suddenly too busy for the woman he'd been courting so attentively just days ago.

"That sounds lovely," he said, injecting the right amount of enthusiasm into his voice while his free hand clenched into a fist against his thigh. "What time should I be there?"

"Six thirty, and it's just dinner and conversation, very casual." Margaret's relief was audible through the phone line. "Though Father mentioned he wanted to talk to you privately at some point, he's been asking questions about your intentions, nothing serious, just you know, fatherly concern."

Of course Mr. Holloway wanted a private conversation, once again wanted to assess whether Vincent was actually serious about his daughter or just wasting her time, wanted to make sure this young man with the odd eyes and the intense demeanor was worthy of continued investment from the family. The warning was clear even though Margaret was trying to make it sound casual and unthreatening.

"I understand completely," Vox said smoothly, the words coming easily. "Any father would want to make sure his daughter is being treated well, I'm happy to talk with him about whatever's on his mind."

"You're wonderful." The relief in Margaret's voice was even stronger now, genuine gratitude that he was being so understanding about her father's protectiveness. "I'll see you tomorrow then, six thirty, and Vincent? Thank you, this means a lot to my family."

She hung up before he could respond, probably worried that if she stayed on the line any longer he might change his mind or she might say something that would make the whole situation more awkward than it already was.

Vox set the phone down carefully and returned his attention to the progress report, trying to recapture the cold focus he'd had before the interruption, but Margaret's call had broken his concentration in ways that were difficult to recover from. The strategic planning felt distant now, complicated by the reminder that he was juggling multiple performances simultaneously and couldn't afford to let any of them slip.

He looked at the fish tank where the smaller guppy had wedged itself into the corner, trying to use the current as protection against its relentless tankmate. It was a temporary solution at

best, a way to buy time rather than actually solve the problem of being trapped in a space too small with a predator who never stopped hunting.

Vox picked up the pen and added a final paragraph to the report.

I've enclosed receipts for the initial component purchases as requested. Future procurement will likely involve more specialized items that may require advance payment or unusual shipping arrangements. I'll coordinate these details through your office as needed.

The sentence was deliberately vague about what "unusual shipping arrangements" might entail, another small seed of ambiguity that would make Barbara wonder what exactly she was coordinating and whether there were legal implications she should be aware of. It was probably overkill at this point, the report was already sufficiently loaded with concerning language, but Vox had learned from decades of corporate manipulation that you couldn't be too careful when planting seeds of doubt and the more angles you worked simultaneously the harder it was for your target to defend against all of them at once.

He pulled out a fresh sheet of paper and began copying the report in his neatest handwriting, making it look professional and important and exactly like the kind of document someone should probably be marking as confidential but wasn't. The receipts David had given him were organized with careful precision and stapled to the back of the report. He slipped everything into a manila envelope addressed to Barbara at the radio station with Alastor's name noted in the corner as a recipient too even though he knew Alastor wouldn't actually read it, or at least wouldn't read it carefully, would just see that his contractor was providing the requested documentation and his secretary was handling everything efficiently.

But that casual dismissal was exactly what Vox was counting on, because the less attention Alastor paid now the more shocking it would be when he eventually did pay attention and realized his secretary had been accumulating detailed technical knowledge about a project that could expose everything he was trying to hide.

Vox sealed the envelope and set it aside for Monday morning delivery.

The apartment was quiet except for the traffic outside and the radiator's occasional protests against the cold seeping in from outside. He should probably eat something, should probably try to maintain the basic self care routines that kept Vincent Whittman functional, but the idea

of food felt distant and unimportant compared to the satisfaction of having executed the first move in what was going to be a long and careful campaign.

He walked to the window and stared out at the dark street where a few people were hurrying past with their heads down against the wind, probably heading to bars or restaurants or wherever normal people went on Friday nights when they weren't plotting psychological warfare against serial killers who'd made the mistake of dismissing them as irrelevant.

His reflection in the window glass was pale and slightly distorted, his own face staring back at him with an expression that wasn't quite sane anymore, the careful mask he'd been maintaining for weeks showing cracks that were getting harder to hide. The dark circles under his eyes had deepened, his collar was slightly askew, his loosened tie had a small stain he hadn't noticed until now.

He looked like someone who was coming apart at the seams, which was probably accurate, but he couldn't afford to care about that right now when there were more important things to focus on.

The desk drawer opened with its usual grinding resistance, the wood swollen from humidity and age. Vox pulled out his notepad and started making lists, the act of organizing his thoughts on paper helping to settle the manic energy that was still thrumming through his system from writing the report.

The strategy was elegant in its simplicity, which was always the mark of good manipulation, the kind that worked not through complex machinations but through exploiting existing vulnerabilities in ways that seemed natural and inevitable. Vox didn't need to actually make Barbara suspicious or disloyal, didn't need to corrupt her or turn her against Alastor or do anything that would be obvious and detectable. He just needed to make her appear increasingly knowledgeable about things she shouldn't know, which would happen naturally as she continued handling all project communication and accumulating context through administrative duties that seemed routine but were actually loading her with classified information.

And Alastor didn't trust anyone completely, Vox knew that much from hell, and nothing he'd seen in this timeline suggested the human version was any different in that regard. If anything, the human version was probably more paranoid, more careful, more aware that one

wrong move could expose him to consequences far worse than whatever could happen to him in hell.

Vox smiled at his notes, feeling the cold satisfaction of a plan that would work if he executed it properly and had the patience to let it develop over time instead of trying to force immediate results.

This was what he was actually good at, not the confrontation in Alastor's office which had apparently just made things worse, not the emotional outburst which had given Alastor ammunition to use against him, but this kind of strategic manipulation that created problems forcing his opponent to react instead of maintaining control of the situation. He'd started his empire in hell through exactly this kind of patient, systematic exploitation of vulnerabilities, finding the weak points in his enemies' operations and applying pressure until something broke. At least until he was strong enough to break them himself.

The clock on the wall showed ten thirty, which meant he should probably get ready for bed since tomorrow was going to require the full performance for Margaret's family and their friends. He needed to be rested, charming, attentive, everything the Holloways expected from their daughter's suitor.

But sleep felt impossible right now with adrenaline still coursing through his system from the satisfaction that he'd found the right angle of attack, from the knowledge that Alastor had dismissed him as irrelevant and was about to discover that was a serious miscalculation.

The radiator was making a new noise, a clicking sound that suggested something wasn't quite right, but Vox couldn't bring himself to care enough to investigate. He couldn't care even when he thought about fishes wellbeing in the current freezing temperature. The fish would survive or they wouldn't, just like everything else in this apartment that was slowly falling apart through benign neglect.

He stood there, staring at nothing, letting his mind drift without purpose for the first time in hours. The small victory of the progress report felt good but it was still just one move in a much longer game, and he couldn't afford to get cocky again or assume this would work just because it should work theoretically. Alastor was smart and dangerous and had survived this long by being paranoid and careful, which meant Vox needed to be even more careful and even more patient.

He looked over to the sink he'd been neglecting, a slowly accumulating pile of dishes that he should probably deal with before it became truly disgusting but that currently felt like someone else's problem. Vincent would care about dishes and basic cleanliness and maintaining his living space. Vox just wanted to execute his strategy and couldn't spare the mental energy for domestic concerns.

The Murphy bed came down with its usual screech of protesting springs, and Vox collapsed onto it fully clothed because getting undressed seemed like too much effort at the moment. The ceiling stared back at him with its water stains and the crack that had been slowly spreading since he moved in and probably indicated structural problems the landlord would never fix.

Tomorrow was Saturday, which meant smiling and making small talk and letting Mr. Holloway interrogate him about his plans for the future and Margaret's place in those plans. He'd eat Mrs. Holloway's pot roast and compliment her cooking and admire the family photographs displayed throughout the house like shrines to normalcy.

And underneath it all, invisible to everyone around him, he'd be thinking about Alastor and Barbara and the slow motion trap he was setting up.

The thought made him smile in the darkness.

Sleep came eventually, though it was light and unsatisfying, full of half formed dreams about offices and paperwork and phones that rang but went dead when he answered them. He woke several times through the night, disoriented and confused about where he was, before reality reasserted itself and he remembered he was in his apartment and everything was fine or at least as fine as things ever were these days.

The alarm would ring in a few hours, dragging him into Saturday and the obligations that came with it, but for now he could just lay there in the darkness and let his mind run through the plan one more time, checking for flaws, looking for weaknesses, making sure he hadn't missed anything obvious that would give the game away too early.

Vox closed his eyes and tried to quiet his thoughts enough to get at least a few more hours of sleep. The fish tank bubbled in the corner. The radiator clanked. The city hummed outside his window.

And somewhere across town, Alastor was probably sleeping peacefully in his nice house with his nice furniture and his complete lack of awareness that his contractor had set his plans in motion.

The thought was satisfying enough to finally let Vox drift back into something approaching actual rest.

Chapter 34

The Holloway house looked better in the evening than it had on Sunday morning.

Maybe it was the warm light spilling from the windows, golden and inviting against the approaching darkness. Maybe it was the fact that Vox wasn't arriving fresh from a church service that had made him contemplate the theological implications of divine punishment. Maybe it was just that he'd had time to mentally prepare himself for an awkward situation this time.

He stood on the front porch, straightening his tie for the third time. The nice one. The one without coffee stains. Margaret had mentioned that her father specifically wanted to talk to him privately, which could mean anything from "I approve of you courting my daughter" to "I have a shotgun and twenty acres of empty land."

The door opened before he could knock.

Margaret stood there in a blue dress that probably cost more than his monthly rent, her hair pinned up in that effortless way that actually required significant effort.

"Vincent! You're right on time." She stepped aside, gesturing him in. "Everyone's already here. The Carmichaels brought their son Robert... I told you about him, he works at the advertising firm downtown? And the Bishops are here too, they're old friends of Daddy's from the club."

Vox's smile didn't falter, but internally he recalibrated. This wasn't just a family dinner.

"Wonderful. I'm looking forward to meeting them."

Margaret took his coat, hanging it on the rack with practiced efficiency. The smell of roasting meat and something sweet hit him, rich and overwhelming after the clean bite of winter air outside.

"Fair warning," she said quietly, leaning in. "Mrs. Carmichael has been asking about you all week. I may have mentioned you work in broadcasting and now she's convinced you're some kind of celebrity."

"I'll try to live up to expectations."

"Oh, and Robert's between jobs right now, so maybe don't mention how well you're doing unless you want to hear about how the advertising industry is dying for an hour."

The living room was full of people and noise, a marked contrast to Vox's memory of the space as a pristine museum.

Mr. Holloway stood by the fireplace with another man of similar age, both holding drinks and laughing at something. Mrs. Holloway was on the sofa with a woman who had to be Mrs. Carmichael, based on the way she was gesturing animatedly with a martini glass. A younger couple, presumably the Bishops, occupied the loveseat, and a man in his late twenties slouched in one of the armchairs with the defeated posture of someone who'd been dragged to this party against his will.

"Everyone!" Margaret's voice cut through the chatter. "This is Vincent Whittman. Vincent, this is... everyone."

The introductions were a blur of handshakes and names. Mr. Carmichael, who had a crushing handshake and the slight wheeze of a heavy smoker. Mrs. Carmichael, whose perfume was aggressive enough to qualify as assault. The Bishops were younger than the other couples, probably mid thirties, and seemed genuinely pleased to meet someone new. And Robert, who managed a weak handshake and a muttered greeting without actually looking up.

"Broadcasting!" Mrs. Carmichael practically shrieked, clutching Vox's hand. "How absolutely thrilling! Do you work with all the famous personalities? Oh, you must tell us everything!"

"Not yet, I'm afraid."

"Oh, don't be modest!" She turned to the room. "Margaret says you're working with very important clients now. The Miller Brothers! I have their refrigerator, you know. Wonderful appliance."

"Vincent's being too humble," Margaret interjected, her pride genuine. "He's managing their entire account. It's a huge responsibility."

"The Miller Brothers account?" Jonathan Bishop leaned forward, interested. "That's impressive. They're notoriously difficult to work with. My firm tried to land their printing business last year and they wouldn't even return our calls."

"We got lucky with the timing," Vox said, settling into the familiar performance of modest competence. "And Margaret's been instrumental in managing the relationship."

"She mentioned you might be moving into more prominent roles at the station," Mrs. Holloway said, appearing from the kitchen with a tray of canapés. "News reporting, perhaps?"

Before Vox could answer, Mr. Carmichael jumped in. "News! Now that's where the real money is. Radio news is dying out right now. Everyone wants their news on their new shiny TVs. You get in on that early, young man, you could really make something of yourself."

"That's the plan, eventually." Vox accepted a canapé from Mrs. Holloway. "Though competition is fierce."

"Competition," Robert muttered from his chair, his first real contribution to the conversation. "That's one word for it."

An awkward silence fell. Margaret shot Robert a look that could have curdled milk.

"Robert's had some difficulties in his field," Mrs. Carmichael said quickly, her smile strained. "The advertising industry has been rather... unstable lately."

"Unstable." Robert laughed, the sound bitter. "That's a nice way of putting it. More like completely controlled by people who don't deserve to be there."

"Robert," his father said, warning clear in his tone.

"What? It's true. You work hard, you do everything right, and then they promote some..." He gestured vaguely. "Some smooth talker who probably cheated his way through school and knows the right people."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees.

"Dinner!" Mrs. Holloway announced with forced brightness. "Everyone, please, let's move to the dining room. Everything's getting cold."

The migration was slightly chaotic, people collecting drinks and repositioning themselves. Vox found himself seated between Margaret and Mrs. Carmichael, directly across from the Bishops. Robert was safely down at the other end, next to his father. Mr. Holloway took his position at the head, surveying his domain with satisfaction.

The table had been set with obvious care. Good china, cloth napkins, a centerpiece of autumn flowers. The roast sat in the center, surrounded by dishes of vegetables and potatoes and rolls that were still steaming.

"This looks wonderful, Elizabeth," Mrs. Carmichael gushed. "You've really outdone yourself."

"It's nothing special," Mrs. Holloway demurred, though her pleasure was obvious. "Franklin, would you say grace?"

Vox bowed his head with everyone else, listening to Holloway's prayer with the blank, attentive expression of someone who'd learned to let religious language wash over him without actually engaging with it. Thanks for the food, thanks for the company, thanks for Your continued blessings on this household, amen.

The meal began with the usual small talk. Mrs. Carmichael dominated much of the early conversation, asking Vox about his childhood, his education, his family background. He provided the carefully constructed lies with smooth confidence, painting a picture of modest origins and hard work that would appeal to this particular audience.

"And your mother passed recently?" Mrs. Carmichael's hand went to her chest. "Oh, you poor dear. That must have been terrible."

"It was difficult," Vox said, letting appropriate emotion color his voice. "But she raised me to value independence and hard work. I think she'd be proud of what I've accomplished."

"I'm sure she would be." Mrs. Carmichael dabbed at her eyes with her napkin. "What a brave young man."

Jonathan Bishop steered the conversation toward business, asking intelligent questions about the radio industry that Vox was happy to answer. It was clear Bishop was genuinely interested in media and broadcasting, had probably considered getting into it himself at some point.

"The television aspect is what's really going to revolutionize things," Vox said, warming to the subject despite himself. "Radio is okay at what it does, but being able to actually see what's happening? That's going to change everything about how people consume news and entertainment."

"Television!" Mr. Carmichael waved his fork dismissively. "That's years away from being practical. The equipment costs alone-"

"Five years," Vox interrupted, then caught himself. "I mean, that's the estimate most industry analysts are working with. Five years until it's commercially viable for home use in every household."

"You really think so?" Bishop was leaning forward now, fully engaged. "Because I've been telling my partners we should start preparing for visual advertising, but they think I'm crazy."

"You're not crazy. The companies that position themselves now for television advertising are going to dominate the market in a decade."

"See!" Bishop turned to his wife. "I told you!"

Marie Bishop smiled indulgently. "Yes, dear. Vincent agrees with you. That makes one whole person."

The conversation flowed more naturally after that, the initial awkwardness easing into genuine engagement. Even Robert seemed to be paying more attention, though his expression remained sour.

Vox was almost relaxing into it when someone reached over to turn on the radio that had been sitting silent in the corner.

Mrs. Carmichael, apparently deciding the dinner needed background music. She fiddled with the dial until soft instrumental music filled the room, nothing intrusive, just pleasant accompaniment to their meal.

They were discussing Margaret's upcoming work schedule when the music ended, replaced by a familiar voice.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, this is Alastor bringing you another evening of fine music and finer conversation."

Vox's fork stopped halfway to his mouth, his attention suddenly divided between the conversation at the table and the voice emerging from the radio in the corner.

"I thought we might begin this evening with a story," Alastor continued, his tone carrying that particular theatrical warmth that somehow managed to sound both genuine and calculated. "A cautionary tale, if you will, about the dangers of overconfidence..."

"Oh, I love this show!" Mrs. Carmichael clapped her hands together. "He has such a wonderful voice. So refined!"

"Refined," Mr. Holloway snorted. He was cutting his meat with more force than strictly necessary. "Sure thing."

Vox forced himself to take a bite of roast, chewing mechanically while his brain split its attention between the table and the radio.

"Franklin," Mrs. Holloway said quietly, warning in her tone.

"I'm just saying. Man puts on airs like that, you know it's compensating for something. Trying too hard to sound like he belongs."

Mrs. Carmichael looked confused. "I think he sounds lovely. Very professional."

"Professional." Mr. Carmichael agreed with Holloway's tone if not his words. "That's generous, Elizabeth. I'd say calculated. You can always tell when someone's performing rather than being genuine."

"I don't know," Bishop interjected, his tone diplomatic. "I've listened to his show a few times. He's certainly distinctive, but isn't that the point of radio personalities? To be memorable?"

Vox realized he needed to contribute something to this conversation. The silence from his end of the table was becoming noticeable. Margaret was looking at him expectantly.

"I've heard his show a few times," Vox said carefully, keeping his tone neutral. "He's certainly distinctive."

It was the safest possible response. Agreeing without actually agreeing. Contributing without taking a stance.

"Distinctive." Holloway seized on the word. "That's diplomatic, Whittman. Come on, you work in the industry. You must have opinions about your competition."

"We're not really competitors," Vox said, taking a sip of water to buy time. "Different stations, different audiences."

"But you must have thoughts about his style. The way he presents himself."

The table had gone quiet. Everyone was listening now, even Robert looking up from his plate with sudden interest. This had somehow become a test, though Vox wasn't entirely sure what he was being tested on.

"He's very theatrical," Vox said finally. "Very... performed. It's effective for his format, I suppose. Gets attention."

"Performed." Holloway nodded, satisfied. "Exactly. That's exactly what it is. Performance. Not genuine. You can tell he's trying too hard to sound like something he's not."

"I think that's a bit harsh," Mrs. Bishop said, her voice gentle but firm. "We don't actually know anything about the man personally. He might be perfectly genuine in his own life."

"Marie, dear, you're too kind." Mrs. Carmichael patted her hand. "But Franklin has a point. There is something rather... affected about it."

"That's show business though, isn't it?" Bishop tried again. "Everyone in broadcasting is performing to some degree. That's the nature of the medium."

"There's performing and there's..." Holloway gestured again, more emphatically this time. "That. Men like that shouldn't be given those kinds of platforms. Puts ideas in people's heads."

Vox felt something cold settle in his stomach. The conversation had shifted, taken a turn he hadn't quite tracked until this moment.

"What kind of ideas?" he asked, and immediately regretted it.

"That they can just... talk their way into places they don't belong." Holloway was warming to his subject now. "Act refined enough and people will forget where you came from. But you can't hide that kind of background, not really. It shows through eventually."

"Franklin." Mrs. Holloway's voice was sharp now. "That's enough. We have guests."

"I'm just saying-"

"We know what you're saying, daddy." Margaret interrupted, her voice bright and forced. "And we're not discussing it. Mrs. Bishop, you mentioned you were redecorating? I'd love to hear about that..."

Vox sat frozen, the roast turning to ash in his mouth.

He'd been so focused on the performance, on managing impressions and saying the right things, that he'd almost missed what was actually being said. The real message underneath the polite dinner conversation.

From the radio, Alastor's voice continued its story about card games and calculated risks, completely unaware of the conversation happening in this dining room. Why would he be aware? He was just doing his job, performing for his audience, existing in his own world where this dinner party didn't matter and couldn't touch him.

But Vox was here, sitting at this table, and he'd almost agreed. Had said "theatrical" and "performed" like those were criticisms, had contributed to a conversation that wasn't actually about broadcasting style at all.

The discomfort sat heavy in his chest, mixing with something else. Something that felt uncomfortably like irritation, though he wasn't entirely sure who it was directed at. Holloway, for saying it. Himself, for almost playing along. The situation itself, for being more complicated than it needed to be.

"Vincent?" Margaret's hand touched his arm. "How's the food? Do you need me to pass you anything?"

"No, I'm fine for now." He forced a smile. "The roast is excellent, Mrs. Holloway."

"Thank you, dear." Mrs. Holloway's smile was strained. "More potatoes?"

The conversation moved on, carefully steered away from dangerous territory. Mrs. Carmichael launched into a story about her sister's recent vacation. Bishop asked Vox about the technical specifications of radio transmitters. Robert went back to sulking.

But Vox's attention was fractured, part of him participating in the dinner while another part stayed focused on the radio in the corner, where Alastor was finishing his story with characteristic theatrical flair.

"And that, my dear listeners, is why one should always know when to fold. Overconfidence, after all, is simply confidence that hasn't been tested yet. Until next time, this has been Alastor wishing you a pleasant evening."

The show transitioned to music. Mrs. Carmichael started humming along. The moment passed.

The rest of the evening proceeded with determined pleasantness. Dessert was apple pie with ice cream, both homemade, both excellent. Vox complimented everything appropriately and made small talk with the Bishops about interior design trends, a topic about which he knew absolutely nothing but could fake competently enough to seem engaged.

Robert cornered him near the end of the evening, when most of the guests had migrated to the living room for after dinner drinks.

"You're smart to get into broadcasting now," Robert said, his voice low and bitter. "Before they ruin that industry too. Fill it up with people who don't deserve to be there, who get ahead because of who they know rather than what they know."

"I think talent usually wins out eventually," Vox said carefully.

"You'd think that." Robert took a long drink. "But it doesn't. Not anymore. The world's changing and not for the better. People used to have standards. Used to care about qualifications and merit. Now it's all about who can talk the smoothest, who can charm the right people, who can..." He gestured vaguely, the drink sloshing in his glass.

"Robert!" Mrs. Carmichael's voice carried from the living room. "Come help your father with his coat!"

Robert shuffled off, leaving Vox standing alone in the hallway with his uncomfortable thoughts.

When he finally left, walking Margaret to the door while her parents and the remaining guests said their goodbyes in the living room, he'd successfully repaired whatever minor damage the dinner conversation had caused. Everyone had shaken his hand with genuine warmth. Mrs. Carmichael had insisted on getting his address so she could send him her famous fruitcake recipe. Bishop had pressed his business card into Vox's palm, suggesting they get lunch sometime to discuss the television industry.

Margaret kissed his cheek, her lips soft and warm against his skin. "Thank you for being so patient with everyone. I know my father can be... difficult."

"He's protective of you. I understand."

"Still. I appreciate you handling it so gracefully. You were wonderful tonight."

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When he got back to his apartment, the guppies were both still alive, swimming their endless circles in their too-small tank.

Vox stood in front of the tank for a long moment, still wearing his coat, the container of leftover pie clutched in one hand.

The larger fish took another bite out of the smaller one's fin.

"I don't know what I was supposed to do there," Vox said to them suddenly. "What was the right move? Agree and bond with Holloway? Disagree and alienate Margaret's father? Just sit there and say nothing?"

The guppies didn't answer, because they were fish and fish didn't care about human moral dilemmas. At least Vox thought so.

Vox set down the pie and shrugged off his coat, letting it fall to the floor.

The problem was that he'd almost agreed. Would have agreed, if he hadn't been paying attention. Would have nodded along and made the appropriate noises and bonded with Holloway over shared disdain.

And the only reason he'd stopped was because he'd finally realized what was actually being said. Not because of any moral conviction or deeply held principle, but because he'd realized they weren't on the same page, the very valid criticisms *he* had about Alastor weren't being addressed, instead focusing on superficial rhetoric.

The smaller guppy hid behind the plastic plant, seeking temporary refuge from its aggressive tankmate.

Vox watched them for another minute, then turned away and started getting ready for bed.

The discomfort would fade. Everything faded eventually. By tomorrow morning this would just be another awkward dinner party story, another performance successfully navigated, another step in the long game of maintaining useful relationships.

But as he lay in bed, staring at the water stained ceiling, he couldn't quite shake the memory of Alastor's voice coming from that radio. Theatrical and performed and completely unaware that he'd been the subject of discussion in this dining room.

Fuck, he thought, closing his eyes.

Tomorrow he'd deliver the progress report. Tomorrow he'd continue executing his careful strategy of making Barbara seem increasingly problematic. Tomorrow he'd get back to the plan.

But tonight, he'd remember this dinner party and the uncomfortable awareness that sometimes he was so focused on details that he forgot to notice what was actually right in front of him.

The thought followed him into uneasy sleep, where he dreamed of dinner parties that never ended and conversations that shifted meaning every time he tried to follow them, and a voice from a radio that he could hear but never quite reach.

Chapter 35

The phone call came Sunday morning, while Vox was neck deep in isobar charts that were due on Monday.

"Vincent?" Margaret's voice was bright through the receiver. "Do you have plans this evening?"

Vox glanced at his desk calendar, which was blank. After all, his social life consisted of work, his apartment, and occasionally remembering the fish existed. "Nothing I can't reschedule. Why?"

"Had a chat with the Bishops before they left yesterday. They're going to the Blue Note today and invited us along. Apparently they go every few weeks and thought we'd enjoy it. Live jazz, dancing, the whole experience. What do you think?"

The Blue Note. Vox remembered Margaret inviting him there for drinks way back when. An upscale jazz club, the kind of place that required decent clothes and had a cover charge that would make his wallet weep. Not his usual scene. Not any scene he'd choose voluntarily.

But the Bishops were useful. Jonathan was already proving to be a valuable connection, someone with actual business sense who might be helpful down the line. And rejecting social invitations from Margaret's approved social circle would raise questions about why Vincent Whittman was so antisocial.

"That sounds wonderful," he said, feigning appropriate enthusiasm. "What time?"

"Eight o'clock. And Vincent?" She paused delicately. "It's fairly upscale. Not formal exactly, but..."

"I should probably not wear my work clothes. Understood."

"I'm not trying to tell you what to wear! I just know you sometimes get so focused on work that you forget about these details."

"Margaret, I appreciate the warning. I promise I'll look presentable."

After hanging up, Vox stared at the isobar chart in front of him without actually seeing it.

Several hours of performing sociability with the Bishops while Margaret watched him with those expectant eyes that suggested this was some kind of test of their relationship's viability.

He could do it. He'd done worse. Had sat through numerous tedious social obligations both here and in hell, had performed charm for far less return than maintaining Margaret's interest was currently worth.

It was just one evening.

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That evening arrived with unseasonable warmth, like the universe had decided to be briefly merciful for whatever reason.

Vox stood in front of his bathroom mirror, adjusting his hair. The suit was his best, charcoal gray, purchased back when Vincent Whittman had briefly believed he might need professional clothing for something other than fetching coffee. The shirt was white, actually ironed, which had required borrowing Mrs. Kowalski's iron and nearly burning a hole in the sleeve before figuring out the temperature settings. His shoes were polished to acceptable shine.

He looked, objectively, like someone who belonged in an upscale jazz club. Like someone who had his life together and wasn't spending every waking moment either obsessing over a secret technology project or plotting psychological warfare against a serial killer.

The effect was almost convincing.

The fish tank bubbled in the corner. Vox glanced at it while shrugging on his jacket. The smaller guppy had lost most of its tail fin now, the ragged edges evidence of constant harassment. It spent most of its time hiding behind the plastic plant, only emerging when it had no choice.

"Wish me luck," Vox told it. "I'm about to spend an entire evening pretending to care about jazz music and whatever the Bishops want to talk about."

The guppy didn't respond, probably because it was too busy trying not to die.

- - -

He stood in front of Margaret's house at seven thirty sharp. She answered the door looking stunning in a deep green dress, a pearl necklace catching the porch light.

"You look great," Vox said, and meant it in the distant, analytical way he meant most observations. She did look great. That was simply objective fact, like noting that water was wet or that Sterling was an incompetent buffoon.

"You clean up nicely yourself." She pulled the door closed behind her, glancing back once. "Mother wanted to invite you in but I told her we'd be late."

"Tell her I appreciate the restraint."

The walk to the Blue Note took twenty five minutes. Margaret filled the silence with chatter about work, about Susan's ongoing drama with her boyfriend who kept promising to propose but never actually did, about her mother's increasingly elaborate plans for next weeks dinner that apparently now involved three types of stuffing.

Vox made appropriate noises of interest, his hands in his pockets, his attention split between Margaret and mentally preparing for the performance ahead.

Social charm. Witty conversation. Interest in jazz music he'd never particularly cared about. Engagement with the Bishops without being so engaging that Margaret felt neglected. All manageable. All within his capabilities.

He'd commanded meetings with literal demons in hell. He could handle one evening with two couples at a jazz club.

The Blue Note occupied a corner building in the arts district, its exterior brick and brass, understated in a way that screamed exclusivity. A small crowd had gathered outside despite the early hour. Couples in evening wear, groups of friends dressed to impress, all waiting for the doors to open at eight.

Vox spotted the Bishops immediately. Jonathan in a navy suit, Marie in something black and elegant with a neckline that suggested confidence and money in equal measure. They waved as Margaret and Vox approached.

"Vincent! Margaret! Perfect timing." Jonathan's handshake was firm, his smile genuine. "I was just telling Marie this is going to be an excellent evening. The quartet tonight is supposed to be exceptional."

"I've been looking forward to this all week," Marie said, linking arms with Margaret. "The last time we came here, the pianist was absolutely transcendent. Made me want to take up music again."

"Did you play?" Margaret asked as they joined the line moving toward the entrance.

"Piano, years ago. Before I decided I was more suited to appreciating music than creating it."

The doors opened and the crowd filtered inside with surprising order, everyone apparently well practiced in the etiquette of upscale establishments.

The interior lived up to its reputation. Low lighting, intimate tables arranged around a central stage, a bar along one wall already busy with early arrivals. The décor was sophisticated, dark wood, burgundy velvet, brass fixtures polished to mirror shine. The air smelled of cigarette smoke and expensive perfume and something cooking in a kitchen somewhere, rich and savory.

A hostess in a black dress led them to a table positioned perfectly between the stage and the bar, close enough to appreciate the performance without being so near that conversation would be impossible.

Vox pulled out Margaret's chair with practiced courtesy, settling into his own seat and accepting a menu from the hostess. The drink prices made his eye twitch. Five dollars for bourbon. *Five dollars.* He could buy an entire bottle for that.

But Vincent Whittman, who was courting the daughter of an insurance executive and socializing with the Bishops, couldn't complain about drink prices. So he ordered bourbon anyway and resolved not to think about how many hours of weather forecasting that represented.

"So Vincent," Jonathan said once their drinks had arrived, "Margaret mentioned you've been taking on more responsibility at the station. How's that going?"

This was safe territory. Vox leaned forward slightly, his posture open and engaging, letting his voice take on the confident cadence that made people believe he knew exactly what he was talking about.

"It's been good. Challenging, but in ways that feel productive. Sterling's been pushing more client management responsibilities my way, which is honestly a relief. Means less time spent on maps and more time doing work that actually matters."

"I thought you enjoyed the meteorology work?" Marie's tone was curious rather than challenging.

"I do, in its way. But there's only so many times you can tell people it's going to rain before you start wondering if there's more to life than atmospheric pressure systems." Vox took a sip of his bourbon, which was admittedly excellent even if it was criminally overpriced. "The Miller Brothers account has been particularly interesting. They're expanding their advertising presence and we're helping them navigate that. Market research, audience targeting, message optimization."

"That's essentially what we do," Jonathan said, his interest clearly piqued. "Different products, same fundamental challenge. How do you make people care about what you're selling?"

"Exactly. And with the Millers, it's even more complex because they're not just selling appliances. They're selling a lifestyle. The idea that having their refrigerator or their washing machine makes you modern, sophisticated, forward-thinking."

"The American dream in appliance form," Marie said with a slight smile.

"Essentially. Everyone wants to feel like they're part of progress, part of the future. Our job is to make them believe that buying a Miller Brothers refrigerator is how they achieve that."

Margaret was watching him with undisguised pride, her hand resting lightly on his arm. "Vincent's been absolutely brilliant with them. He has this way of understanding what people want before they know they want it."

"That's the key to good marketing," Jonathan agreed. "Anticipating desire rather than just responding to it."

The conversation flowed naturally from there, moving between topics with the ease of people who were genuinely enjoying themselves. Jonathan asked about the television industry's trajectory, whether Vox thought it would actually replace radio or if both mediums would coexist. Marie wanted to know if Vox had met any famous personalities, seeming slightly disappointed when he explained that meteorologists rarely rubbed shoulders with the talent.

The music started as their food arrived. Vox had ordered something from the menu at random, too focused on conversation to actually read the descriptions. The quartet took the stage with minimal fanfare. Piano, bass, drums, saxophone. They launched into their first piece, something smooth and complex that filled the room with sound that demanded attention without overwhelming conversation.

Vox found himself actually relaxing into the evening. This was manageable. Pleasant, even. The Bishops were good company, intelligent and engaged. Margaret was happy, which meant this social obligation was successfully completed. The music was genuinely excellent.

He was in the middle of telling a story about a particularly disastrous weather forecast which was carefully edited to make himself look charmingly humble rather than incompetent, when his peripheral vision caught movement near the bar.

His brain processed the information before conscious thought could intervene.

That posture. That particular way of holding a glass. That specific angle of shoulders.

"...the entire afternoon's programming had been planned around outdoor events, but obviously nobody was going to..."

The story died in his throat mid sentence. His brain couldn't hold both things simultaneously.

"And then?" Margaret's hand touched his arm. "What did you do?"

He tried to grab the thread of his story. Where had he been? Afternoon programming. Outdoor events. The storm that had ruined everything.

"Sorry, I just..." He could feel his concentration fragmenting, splintering into pieces he couldn't quite gather. "Where was I?"

"Sterling was angry about the programming schedule," Jonathan prompted, his expression curious.

"Right. Sterling. He was furious because we'd promised the sponsors outdoor coverage and obviously you can't do outdoor coverage during a thunderstorm, so he had to scramble to fill three hours with indoor content..."

Vox was still talking but he wasn't listening to himself anymore. His attention had split, the larger part staying locked on the bar where Alastor stood with a glass in hand, talking to two people Vox had never seen before.

A woman in her late forties, jewelry that caught the light every time she moved. A man about Alastor's age in an expensive suit, his posture relaxed and confident. They flanked Alastor in a loose triangle, all three engaged in conversation that looked natural rather than forced.

Alastor's posture was different than Vox had ever seen it. Not the careful professional neutrality of their business meetings or the theatrical performance of his broadcasts. Something looser. Actually relaxed, as if he was comfortable here in a way he never seemed to be elsewhere. Except...

The woman said something, gesturing with her drink. Alastor laughed a real laugh that Vox could see even if he couldn't hear it over the music and ambient noise.

Something uncomfortable twisted in Vox's chest.

"...which Sterling somehow decided was my fault even though I'm a meteorologist, not an electrical engineer, and I certainly don't control the power grid..."

He was still talking. His mouth was still producing words in approximately the right order. But his brain wasn't supervising the process anymore.

They were boring. They had to be boring him. Standard jazz club patrons making whatever inane small talk people made when they had nothing interesting to say. Discussing their mortgages or their day jobs or whatever mundane concerns filled the lives of people who thought coming to a jazz club on Sunday night was the height of sophistication.

Alastor couldn't possibly actually be enjoying this conversation. He was performing. Playing the charming public figure because that's what you did when you were recognizable and couldn't afford to be rude to potential listeners. The smile was for show. The laughter was calculated. Maybe he could score some extra points if he saved Alastor from the conversation, because was obviously...

The man said something else. Alastor's whole face lit up with delight, responding with evident enthusiasm to whatever had been said.

Vox's fingers tightened around his bourbon glass.

"That must have been frustrating," Marie said, and Vox realized with distant horror that he'd lost track of the conversation entirely. Had no idea what he'd just been saying or how his story had ended.

"It was character building," he said, hoping that was an appropriate response to whatever had just been discussed.

Margaret was watching him with a slight furrow between her eyebrows. Concerned but not yet alarmed. "You seem distracted tonight. Is everything okay?"

"Fine. Just tired. Long week."

"You should take better care of yourself," she said, her tone gently chiding. "You work too hard."

"Someone has to pick up Sterling's slack."

That got a laugh from Jonathan, easing some of the tension. The conversation moved on, the Bishops discussing some recent vacation they'd taken to Cape Cod, describing the scenery and the seafood with the enthusiasm of people who genuinely enjoyed traveling.

Vox made appropriate noises of interest. Asked questions at theoretically correct moments. Laughed when laughter seemed warranted.

But he couldn't stop tracking Alastor's movements at the bar.

The woman was showing him something. Photos, maybe? He leaned in to look, his expression warm and engaged. Made some comment that sent both his companions into fits of laughter.

What were they talking about? What could possibly be so entertaining that it warranted that kind of genuine response?

Vox had worked for weeks to get Alastor to engage with him directly. Had manipulated and strategized and executed carefully planned moves designed to force acknowledgment and respect. Had finally negotiated three hundred dollars a week and formal contract terms through sheer persistence and willingness to walk away.

And here was Alastor, giving away genuine attention for free to two random strangers whose names he probably didn't even know.

The injustice of it sat bitter in Vox's throat.

"Vincent?" Margaret again, her hand on his arm more insistent now. "You keep looking at something. What are you staring at?"

"Nothing. Sorry." He forced himself to focus on her face, on her concerned expression. "Just people watching. Habit from work. Always analyzing crowds, reading body language."

"You should relax. Enjoy the music. That's why we're here."

"You're right. Tell me more about the Cape Cod trip? I have relatives from the area"

Marie launched into a story about a particularly memorable restaurant, describing the lobster in exhaustive detail. Vox nodded along.

Alastor ordered another drink. The bartender didn't need to ask what he wanted, just poured something amber into a fresh glass. A regular then. Someone who came here often enough to have established preferences and rapport with the staff.

How often did he come here? Every Sunday? Twice a month? Whenever he needed to unwind from the stress of his secret murderer hobby?

The thought arrived with vicious satisfaction. These people laughing at his jokes, enjoying his company, basking in his attention had no idea. No concept of what stood in front of them wearing expensive clothes and a charming smile. They thought he was just some radio host, some local celebrity worth impressing with their wit. But Vox did.

They were talking to a serial killer and thought they were having a pleasant evening out.

The irony was almost funny.

Except it wasn't funny because Vox was supposed to be the one leveraging that secret, using it to build influence and power. Not watching from across the room while Alastor gave away his time and attention to random civilians who'd done nothing to earn it.

"One moment," Vox said abruptly, interrupting whatever Marie had been saying about Cape Cod lighthouse tours. "I will be right back."

He stood before anyone could respond.

Margaret's hand caught his wrist. She leaned in, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Bathroom's that way." She nodded toward the opposite side of the room, away from the bar.

"Oh. Right. Thanks."

He walked in the indicated direction. Made it approximately five steps before changing course the instant Margaret turned back to the table.

His feet carried him toward the bar.

Alastor was still engaged with his companions, his back partially to Vox's approach. The woman noticed him first, her expression shifting to polite curiosity as this stranger interrupted their conversation.

"Alastor," Vox said.

Alastor turned. For a fraction of a second, genuine surprise crossed his face before settling into professional neutrality.

"Whittman." His tone was pleasant but carried a question. "What an unexpected encounter. I wasn't aware you frequented this establishment."

"I don't. Usually. Didn't expect to see you here either."

"I come here most Sundays when my schedule permits." Alastor gestured to his companions. "The music is exceptional and the company is pleasant. Are you here with anyone? Colleagues? Friends?"

The question was innocuous. Basic social courtesy. The obvious answer was "yes, I'm here with Margaret and our friends" followed by polite introduction and brief small talk before returning to his table.

"No," Vox heard himself say. "Just me. Needed to get out of the apartment."

The lie surprised him even as it emerged. He didn't know why he'd said it. Didn't understand the instinct that made acknowledging Margaret's existence feel impossible in this moment.

Alastor's eyebrow rose fractionally but he didn't question him further. "How fortuitous. May I introduce you to..." He paused, the slightest hesitation.

The woman laughed, warm and genuine. "How terribly rude of me! You've been standing here for a while and no introductions. Though I suppose at jazz clubs one doesn't always need formalities. Just good music and better company."

"Indeed," the man agreed, smiling at Vox with easy friendliness. "Don't worry about it. Any friend of Alastor's is welcome here."

They didn't offer names. Didn't seem to think it mattered. Just shifted their positions slightly to accommodate Vox into their loose circle at the bar, the movement natural and unforced.

Vox found himself included in their group without having actually requested inclusion.

"Vincent works at the television station," Alastor said, his tone carrying that particular flatness that suggested he was providing information out of social obligation rather than genuine interest. "Meteorology. Very competent at predicting when it will rain."

The faint dismissiveness in that last sentence landed like a needle between Vox's ribs.

"Oh how fascinating!" The woman's enthusiasm seemed genuine. "I've always wondered how weather prediction actually works. It seems impossibly complex."

Vox opened his mouth to explain about atmospheric pressure systems and air mass interactions, but his attention had already fractured again. The question was directed at him but his focus stayed locked on Alastor, who had turned slightly away, his body language subtly excluding Vox from his immediate sphere of attention.

"It's mostly pattern recognition," Vox said automatically. "Reading data from weather balloons and ground stations, understanding how different systems interact. The mathematics are quite precise actually."

"But you're still essentially making an educated guess, aren't you?" the man interjected. "Predicting probable outcomes based on incomplete information?"

"All science is prediction based on available evidence."

They were pleasant people. Nice, even. The kind of individuals who made conversation easy, who laughed at jokes and contributed interesting observations and generally behaved like functional adults who'd mastered basic social interaction.

But Vox couldn't focus on them. Couldn't engage properly with their questions or their pleasant commentary. His entire awareness had narrowed to Alastor, who was nursing his

drink and contributing to the conversation with minimal effort while somehow remaining its gravitational center.

"Alastor," Vox tried again, looking for an opening to redirect toward actual substance. "I wanted to ask you about-"

"Oh, I adore this piece!" The woman interrupted, her attention shifting to the stage where the quartet had started something new. "Is this Ellington? It sounds like Ellington but I can never tell for certain."

"Take the A Train," Alastor confirmed. "Though this is a rather interesting interpretation. The pianist is taking liberties with the tempo."

And just like that, the conversation had moved past Vox's attempt at engagement. They were discussing Ellington's influence on modern jazz, debating whether this particular arrangement honored or undermined the original composition.

Vox stood there, technically included in the circle but somehow outside the actual interaction. He tried several more times to redirect the conversation toward Alastor specifically, to create an opening for the discussion he needed to have.

Each attempt was smoothly deflected. Not rudely, nothing Alastor did could be called overtly rude. But with professional politeness that made it clear they were casual acquaintances at a social venue, nothing more. Certainly not business partners. Not collaborators on revolutionary technology. Just the radio host and the weatherman making polite small talk.

"What brings you out tonight?" the man asked Vox directly. "Just felt like hearing some good music?"

"Something like that."

"Well you picked an excellent evening for it. This quartet is exceptional. Far better than the group they had last month."

"Though the last pianist had better technical skills," the woman countered. "This one is more emotional but less precise."

"Emotion is precision," Alastor said mildly. "Just of a different kind. Technical perfection without feeling is just mathematical exercise."

They laughed, delighted by this observation, and launched into a discussion about the relationship between technical skill and artistic expression that Vox couldn't muster the energy to care about.

He tried again. "Alastor, I submitted the progress report to..."

“Ah, ah.” Alastor lifted one finger, the motion small but decisive, a faint smile still fixed in place. “No.” His voice remained pleasant, almost indulgent, but the finality beneath it was unmistakable. He accepted a fresh drink from the bartender with a nod of thanks. “No work talk here. This is a jazz club, Whittman, not a conference room. Let’s maintain some boundaries between professional obligations and personal time, shall we?”

"But it will only take a minute."

"If you have project questions, coordinate with Barbara Monday morning." Alastor took a sip of his drink, his attention already drifting back toward his other companions. "She handles all project communication now, as we discussed. I'm sure she'll address any concerns you might have with her usual efficiency."

The casual dismissal landed like a physical blow. Vox felt his jaw tighten, his hands clenching in his pockets.

"Some decisions require direct technical consultation. Things that can't be effectively communicated through administrative intermediaries."

"Barbara is remarkably competent. I have complete faith in her ability to coordinate project communication." Alastor's tone remained conversational, as if they were discussing weather rather than deliberately shutting down Vox's attempt at engagement. "Now if you'll excuse me, I really should be heading back to the station soon. The evening broadcast doesn't record itself, and I prefer to have time for proper preparation."

He was leaving. Was actually going to finish his drink and walk away, their conversation ending before it had properly begun. Before anything of substance had been discussed.

Vox realized he was leaning in without consciously deciding to, the noise level in the club forcing him to get close to be heard over the music and ambient conversation. Close enough to smell Alastor's cologne, close enough to notice the way the low light caught in his eyes and sharpened every expression.

"The power supply was clever engineering," Vox said, his voice low enough that only Alastor could hear it properly. "But straightforward implementation once you understand the principles. The transmitter though... that's where things get genuinely interesting. Where we start manipulating physics in ways that technically shouldn't work but will anyway if we're smart enough about it."

Alastor's attention shifted. Not dramatically, but noticeably. His eyes focused on Vox with actual interest for the first time that evening.

"I have ideas," Vox continued, "that would make conventional broadcast engineers weep with frustration trying to understand how we achieved the results. But they require someone who actually understands the underlying theory rather than just filing paperwork and playing telephone between the engineer and the client."

A pause. Alastor's expression remained carefully neutral, that professional mask firmly in place.

Then, so subtle it was almost missable, the corner of his mouth curved upward. Not quite a smile. Something more complicated.

"I suppose," he said slowly, "that a brief consultation on the way to the broadcast booth wouldn't be entirely unreasonable. Assuming you're genuinely interested in technical discussion rather than simply bothering me during my limited personal time."

Victory surged through Vox's chest, hot and immediate.

"I can be there in twenty minutes."

"I'm leaving now." Alastor set down his empty glass. "If you're coming, you'll need to leave now as well."

"I'll follow you."

Alastor turned to his companions, his expression shifting back to warm sociability. "My apologies, but duty calls. It's been a genuine pleasure speaking with you both. I do hope you enjoy the rest of the performance."

"Of course! Don't let us keep you," the woman said, patting his arm briefly. "We'll see you next time you're here."

They exchanged farewells with the ease of people who genuinely liked each other, who'd see each other again and were comfortable with that prospect.

Then Alastor was moving toward the exit, and Vox was following, his mind already racing ahead to what he'd say in Alastor's office, what points he'd make, how he'd leverage this unexpected opportunity into something more substantial.

He made it three steps before remembering.

Margaret.

The table. The Bishops. The people he'd been sitting with for the past two hours before abandoning them without explanation to chase Alastor across the room and out of the building.

Vox should go back. Should return to the table and apologize for the extended absence and explain that he'd run into someone from work and gotten caught up in conversation. Should rejoin the evening like a normal person on a date.

He looked at the exit where Alastor had just disappeared.

The decision made itself.

Vox turned and walked toward the door without looking back.

The night air hit him like a slap after the club's warmth. Vox stepped onto the sidewalk, looking around for Alastor, who was already halfway down the block moving with purposeful strides.

"Come on now!" Alastor called without turning around. "If you're following me, keep up."

Vox hurried to catch up, falling into step beside him.

Chapter 36

The cold air hit them as they stepped outside, sharp enough to sting.

Alastor walked with purpose, his stride unhurried despite having just announced they needed to leave immediately. The street was quiet at this hour, most sensible people having already secured themselves inside warm establishments or headed home for the evening.

He glanced sideways at his unexpected companion.

Vincent looked somewhat pathetic in the lamplight. His nose had gone red from the cold, his hair was already tousled from the wind, and his hands were shoved deep into his coat pockets in that particular way that suggested he was either freezing or deeply uncomfortable with the current situation. Possibly both.

The corner of Alastor's mouth curved upward despite himself.

What was wrong with this man?

He'd encountered obsessive fans before, certainly. Came with the territory of being a public figure. People who recognized his voice in restaurants, who called the station asking personal questions, who wrote letters detailing how much his program meant to them. Standard audience behavior, flattering in small doses, tedious in larger ones.

The amusing part was that Vincent seemed to think he was being subtle about it. As if Alastor hadn't noticed the staring, the calculated approaches, the transparent attempts at manufacturing connection.

They walked in silence for half a block. Vincent kept pace but said nothing, his breath misting white in the cold air.

Alastor decided to test something.

"Are you certain your date won't mind my keeping you this long?" He kept his tone light, conversational. Let the wry amusement color his voice just slightly as he glanced over.

Vincent blinked, thrown completely off balance. His stride faltered for just a moment before recovering.

The silence stretched. Alastor found himself genuinely curious about how Vincent would respond. Would he double down on the lie? Claim ignorance? Manufacture some elaborate excuse about why he'd lied in the first place?

"Does it matter?" Vincent said flatly.

The response was unexpected enough that Alastor's eyebrows rose. Not a lie or a deflection, but a genuine question that suggested Vincent either didn't care about the answer or had already made his choice about priorities.

Interesting.

"Not particularly," Alastor said, his tone utterly neutral. "Though I do find it interesting that you felt the need to lie about such a trivial detail. What were you afraid I'd think if you admitted you were on a date?"

Vincent didn't answer. Just kept walking, his expression unreadable in the intermittent lamplight.

Alastor didn't push. The silence itself was informative. Vincent had surprised him. Most people, when caught in an obvious lie, immediately tried to explain or justify or create some new fiction to cover the first one. And Vincent was no exception, based on what Alastor had

gleamed from their previous interactions. The fact that this time, Vincent simply didn't do any of these things, suggested either unusual self awareness or complete lack of shame about his behavior.

They reached the station five minutes later. Alastor pulled out his keys, unlocking the front entrance and holding the door for Vincent with deliberate courtesy.

The building was quiet at this hour. Most staff had left by six, leaving only the skeleton crew needed for evening broadcasts. Their footsteps echoed in the empty lobby, unusually loud.

Alastor glanced at Vincent again as they walked toward the elevator. The man was lost in thought, his expression distant. That antsy energy from earlier had returned, his fingers drumming against his thigh, his jaw tight.

What was going through his head right now? Regret about the abandoned date? Anxiety about whatever consequences awaited him? Or something else entirely?

Alastor found himself genuinely curious.

"You're quiet," he observed as the elevator began its grinding ascent. "Having second thoughts about this impromptu consultation?"

"No." Vincent's response was immediate. "Just... thinking."

"About?"

"Various things."

How wonderfully uninformative.

The elevator opened onto the second floor. Alastor led the way to his office, Vincent following a half step behind like a shadow.

The antsy energy was getting worse. Alastor could see it in the way Vincent's weight kept shifting, the way his hand kept moving toward his pocket and then away again, the slight tension in his shoulders.

Alastor unlocked his office door, stepping inside and flipping on the lights. The space settled into its familiar warmth. Mahogany desk, organized bookshelves, the scent of furniture polish and old paper.

He was reaching for his coat buttons when Vincent spoke up.

"I'm here for business, but I need to get back soon." The words came out rushed, slightly desperate. "I just need to discuss the transmitter specifications quickly and then..."

"Back?" Alastor turned, genuinely curious. "Back where?"

"To the club. To Margaret." Vincent made a vague gesture. "I need to explain. She's going to be confused and I should probably-"

Alastor had to work very hard not to laugh.

He shrugged off his coat, the expensive wool sliding from his shoulders with practiced ease. Walked directly to Vincent and held it out, nodding toward the coat rack near the door.

Vincent took the coat automatically, his brain clearly still caught on whatever he'd been saying.

Alastor settled into his desk chair comfortably, pulling out his broadcast notes and arranging them just so. Pen positioned at the exact right angle. Water glass filled from the carafe he

kept in the office. Everything in its proper place.

"My dear Vincent," he said mildly, not looking up from his notes. "That ship sailed the moment you left the club. I wouldn't recommend attempting to reboard now. It's been..." He glanced at his watch. "Nearly twenty minutes. She's either already left or is currently explaining to her friends why her date abandoned her mid evening to chase after his business associate."

He looked up then, meeting Vincent's eyes with calm assessment.

"Either way, the damage is done. Returning now would only make it worse. You'd be admitting you left for something trivial enough to complete in twenty minutes, which makes the abandonment seem even more insulting." He picked up his pen, making a small notation on his script. "So let's not rush. Tell me what you wanted to tell me. Since you've apparently decided it was worth this particular social sacrifice."

Vincent stood frozen, still holding Alastor's coat. His expression cycled through several emotions too quickly to track. Realization, horror, anger, resignation.

Then, slowly, he walked to the coat rack and hung up the coat.

Alastor watched this with polite interest while organizing his broadcast materials. The evening show was live in forty minutes. He needed to review his notes, check the record selections with the booth, make sure everything was properly prepared.

But he could spare a few minutes for this. Partly because Vincent actually did seem to have legitimate technical knowledge worth extracting. Partly because watching this man systematically destroy his personal life in pursuit of whatever this was had become unexpectedly entertaining. And of course, he still wanted to know just how much Vincent knew.

Vincent turned back from the coat rack, his expression more composed now. Resigned to his choices.

"I left the previous report with Barbara," he said, his voice steady now. "Did you get a chance to review it? Because I had some thoughts about the integration phase that would benefit from direct discussion rather than going through administrative channels."

"I'm sure Barbara is handling it with her usual efficiency," Alastor said pleasantly.

The lie rolled off his tongue with practiced ease. Barbara hadn't seen the reports. Barbara would never see the reports. Everything Vincent submitted went directly to Alastor's locked desk drawer, where he reviewed them in private before filing them away in places Barbara would never have reason to look.

But Vincent clearly thought otherwise. Thought he was being clever with his increasingly suspicious wording, his strange terminology, his implications of classified development. Thought he was planting seeds of concern that would make Barbara ask questions, seek clarification, maybe even become uncomfortable with her role as intermediary.

Alastor had recognized the strategy immediately. It was transparent, obvious, the kind of manipulation a clever person attempted when they thought they were the smartest person in the room.

Which meant Vincent was either genuinely stupid enough to think it would work, or ballsy enough to try it anyway despite knowing the risks.

And he was doing all of this in hopes that either Barbara would realize this and cause problems, or that Alastor would realize she knew too much and... what? Fire her? Remove her from the project?

Force direct communication with Vincent?

But Alastor wasn't going to correct that assumption. Letting Vincent continue thinking his little scheme was working would provide valuable information about exactly how

manipulative this man was willing to be and watching him try to manipulate Alastor through his own secretary was almost endearing in its audacity.

It wasn't surprising, not really. Everything about Vincent screamed untrustworthy. The obvious lies, the calculated approaches, the way he'd coolly abandoned his date without apparent remorse once something more valuable appeared.

Alastor had recognized it from their first real conversation. He'd hoped it was just standard business behavior. The kind of casual dishonesty everyone engaged in to some degree. But tonight had confirmed it was something deeper. Something more fundamental to Vincent's character.

It was disappointing. The technology was genuinely revolutionary. The engineering vision was sound. It would have been pleasant to work with someone who was merely competent and trustworthy rather than brilliant and duplicitous.

But one worked with the tools available, not the tools one wished for.

Vincent was still standing there, clearly waiting for Alastor to engage with the report content.

Alastor made another notation on his broadcast script, letting the silence stretch just long enough to be slightly uncomfortable.

The real problem, Alastor thought as he made another small notation on his script, was that there were no friends in this industry.

Everyone was cutthroat. Everyone had angles, agendas, schemes layered beneath the pleasant professional veneer. It was the nature of the medium. Broadcasting attracted a particular breed of ambitious narcissists who believed their voice, their vision, their particular talent deserved to be amplified above everyone else's.

He'd known this intellectually for years. Had observed it, had participated in it himself when necessary. But he understood it more clearly with each passing day, each new interaction that peeled back another layer of pretense to reveal the calculating machinery underneath.

It wasn't that he'd expected Vincent to be different, exactly. But he supposed there'd been some small, largely unconscious hope that the brilliance might be accompanied by at least baseline integrity. That someone genuinely talented wouldn't need to rely quite so heavily on manipulation and performance.

Naive, in retrospect.

He'd never actually tried befriending Vincent. Hadn't extended any genuine warmth or invitation into his personal life. But that was because Vincent hadn't given him any reason to. Had, in fact, demonstrated from the very beginning that he was exactly the kind of person Alastor had learned to keep at careful professional distance.

A slight movement in his peripheral vision pulled him from these thoughts.

Alastor looked up.

Vincent had seated himself in the chair across from the desk without asking for permission, like he belonged there. His posture was carefully casual, one ankle crossed over his knee, hands resting in his lap. The picture of patient waiting.

Except his eyes were fixed on Alastor with that particular intensity that was becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

Alastor set down his pen.

"Well," he said mildly. "Did you abandon your date simply to sit in my office and stare? Because I must say, that seems like a rather poor return on investment. Surely you could have kept staring at me from across the club and saved yourself considerable social awkwardness."

Vincent blinked, thrown slightly off balance. His careful casual posture shifted, straightening. "I came to discuss the transmitter specifications."

"Then discuss them. You have..." Alastor glanced at his watch. "Approximately thirty minutes before I need to be in the broadcast booth. I suggest you make efficient use of the time."

"The integration phase requires careful consideration of the power supply's output characteristics." Vincent leaned forward slightly, his hands coming together. "We're dealing with signal propagation in ways that standard broadcast theory doesn't adequately address. The conventional wisdom is that portable transmission requires sacrificing either range or fidelity. But if we approach the problem from a different angle..."

"What angle?" Alastor interrupted. He picked up his pen again, not to write but simply to have something to hold. A small barrier between them.

"Non-linear amplification coupled with adaptive frequency modulation. The power supply's stability gives us a foundation that conventional designs lack. We can push the envelope in ways that..." Vincent's hands moved as he spoke, sketching invisible diagrams in the air. "It's difficult to explain without the schematics in front of us."

"Then get them." Alastor gestured toward his desk. "I assume you brought copies of whatever it is you wanted to discuss?"

"They're in the report I submitted to Barbara."

"Then you'll have to describe them verbally. I don't have access to Barbara's files at this hour." The lie was smooth, effortless. "Surely a man of your apparent expertise can articulate technical concepts without visual aids?"

Vincent's jaw tightened fractionally. "Of course. The core innovation is in how we handle the feedback loop between the power supply and the transmitter. Traditional designs treat them as

separate systems, but if we integrate them at the circuit level..."

He continued talking, his voice taking on that particular cadence of someone who genuinely understood what they were discussing. The technical competence was real, Alastor had to admit. Underneath all the manipulation and desperate social maneuvering, Vincent actually knew what he was doing.

Which made the rest of it more frustrating, somehow. All that brilliance wasted on someone so fundamentally unreliable.

Alastor found himself only half listening to the actual content, his attention caught instead on the delivery. The way Vincent's entire demeanor changed when discussing technical matters. More animated, more genuine. His hands moved constantly, his eyes lighting up with something that looked almost like joy when he hit a particularly elegant solution to a design problem.

This, Alastor thought, was probably the closest thing to authentic he'd ever seen from the man. Not performing for an audience, not calculating optimal responses, just engaged with ideas that genuinely excited him.

It was almost appealing. Almost made him seem like someone worth knowing beyond their utility.

Almost.

"The challenge," Vincent was saying, leaning even further forward now, "is thermal management at that power density. We're talking about dissipation requirements that would normally require active cooling, but obviously that's not practical for a portable system, so we need to-"

"Vincent."

The name stopped him mid sentence. His eyes snapped to Alastor's face, a question in them.

"Yes?"

"Why are you really here?" Alastor set down his pen again, steepling his fingers. "And I don't mean the superficial answer about technical specifications. I mean why did you feel it was necessary to end your night out early, follow me out of a jazz club, and corner me in my office during my limited personal time to discuss matters that could easily wait until Monday morning?"

The question hung in the air between them.

Vincent's expression went carefully blank. "I thought the specifications were time sensitive."

"Nothing about this project is so urgent it can't wait twenty four hours. The prototype isn't even complete yet. We have weeks before integration becomes relevant." Alastor tilted his head slightly, studying him. "So I'll ask again. Why are you really here?"

"Because," Vincent started, then stopped. His hands clenched in his lap. "Because coordinating everything through Barbara is inefficient. Important decisions are getting delayed while she routes messages back and forth. Direct communication would streamline the entire process."

"Hmm." Alastor let the syllable convey profound skepticism. "And that inefficiency was so intolerable you couldn't even finish your evening out before addressing it?"

"I saw an opportunity. I took it."

"An opportunity." Alastor's smile was thin. "Is that what we're calling it?"

Vincent leaned forward, his jaw clenched.

"What exactly are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything. I'm observing that your behavior tonight has been erratic. Abandoning your companion without explanation to pursue a business discussion that isn't actually urgent. Lying about being alone when you were clearly with someone. Following me out of the club like a..." He paused, considering his word choice. "Like someone with questionable priorities."

"My priorities are fine."

"Are they?" Alastor leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking softly. "Because from where I'm sitting, you just destroyed what I assume was a promising romantic relationship for the sake of a conversation that could have happened Monday morning in a properly scheduled meeting."

"Margaret will understand."

"Will she?" The question was genuinely curious. "I suppose we'll find out. Though I suspect 'understanding' and 'forgiving' are not quite the same thing."

Vincent stood abruptly, the chair scraping backward. He walked to the window, his back to Alastor, shoulders tight with tension.

Alastor watched this with clinical interest. The man was agitated, that much was obvious. But whether it was guilt about Margaret or frustration at being questioned or something else entirely was harder to determine.

The silence stretched. Outside, the city continued its evening rhythm. A car horn blared somewhere. Footsteps echoed in the hallway below, probably the night janitor making his rounds.

"I didn't come here for relationship advice," Vincent said finally, his voice tight.

"No, you came here to discuss transmitter specifications." Alastor picked up his script again, making a show of returning his attention to it. "So discuss them. Or don't. But I have a broadcast to prepare for, and you've used up approximately ten minutes of your allotted time on deflection and wounded pride."

Vincent turned from the window. "You're being more hostile than usual."

The observation was accurate enough that Alastor paused. Was he? Yes, actually. The pleasant professional neutrality he usually maintained had curdled into something sharper. More cutting.

When had that happened?

He examined his own reactions with the same analytical distance he applied to everything else. The irritation, the faint disgust, the impulse to needle and provoke rather than simply maintain cordial distance.

The realization arrived with uncomfortable clarity.

Vincent had caused visceral recoil from behavior so desperate, so pathetic, so fundamentally unappealing that it poisoned even professional courtesy.

Watching him abandon his date had probably done it. Not because Alastor cared about Margaret, he'd met her perhaps twice, pleasant enough woman, competent at her job from what he understood. But because of what the abandonment revealed about Vincent's character.

The complete absence of shame. The casual disregard for someone who'd done nothing to deserve that treatment. The willingness to burn bridges for marginal advantage. The sheer gracelessness of it.

It was one thing to be calculating in business. Quite another to be cruel in personal matters without even the excuse of necessity.

Alastor had known Vincent was manipulative, dishonest, opportunistic. Had catalogued all these traits and decided they were manageable within the bounds of a business relationship.

But this was different. This was watching someone reveal themselves to be fundamentally graceless. Desperate in ways that read as weakness rather than determination.

And once you saw someone as pathetic, it was remarkably difficult to unsee it.

"Perhaps I am being more hostile," Alastor said mildly. "Consider it a reflection of my mood. I was enjoying a pleasant evening before you interrupted it."

"I didn't interrupt anything. You invited me here."

"Because you made it clear you wouldn't leave me alone otherwise. There's a difference between invitation and surrender to inevitability."

Vincent moved back toward the desk but didn't sit. Instead he stood there, gripping the back of the chair, his knuckles white against the dark wood.

"What do you want from me?" The question came out raw, frustrated. "You negotiate a formal contract, agree to pay me actual money, acknowledge the value of my work. But then you won't engage with me directly. You route everything through Barbara like I'm some kind of contamination that needs handling at arm's length. You invite me here and then spend the entire time criticizing my behavior instead of discussing the actual project. What do you want?"

The outburst was interesting in its honesty. Perhaps the first genuinely unguarded thing Vincent had said all evening.

Alastor considered his answer carefully.

"I want competent work delivered on schedule with minimal drama. That's what I'm paying for. What I don't want is whatever this," he gestured vaguely between them, "is."

"Professional respect would be nice."

"Professional respect is earned through professional behavior. Chasing me down for a conversation that isn't actually urgent is not professional behavior. It's obsessive."

Vincent frowned. The word had landed exactly as intended.

"I'm not obsessed with you."

"Aren't you?" Alastor stood, coming around the desk, crowding Vincent's space, feeling physical dynamic shift. He paused, studying Vincent's face. The flush creeping up his neck. The rapid pulse visible at his throat. The way his hands had tightened on the chair until his knuckles were bloodless.

Alastor registered the physical reaction with detached interest. Irritation would have been useful. This wasn’t. If Vincent tipped any further into anger, the conversation would derail and derailed conversations accomplished nothing.

"If you're not obsessed, Vincent, you're doing a remarkable impression of someone who is."

Vincent stood there, frozen. Then, slowly, deliberately, he released his grip on the chair and straightened.

"You're right," Vincent finally said, his voice carefully controlled now. "I made poor choices tonight. I should have waited until Monday."

The words were correct. The tone was appropriate. But something underneath felt wrong, performative in a way that suggested Vincent was retreating behind walls rather than actually acknowledging anything.

"I'll leave," Vincent continued, already moving toward the coat rack. "You clearly have preparations to make and I've already caused enough disruption for one evening."

He pulled his coat from the rack with sharp movements. Shrugged it on. Buttoned it with fingers that were perfectly steady.

Alastor watched this transformation with fascination. The raw emotion from moments ago had vanished completely, replaced by cold professional distance. Like watching shutters slam closed over windows that had been briefly open.

“Vincent.”

He paused at the door, hand resting on the knob, but he didn't turn around.

“The technical work is good. Genuinely innovative,” Alastor said. “Don’t let your personal life compromise it.” A beat passed, and then, almost impulsively, he added, “Come by my office Monday morning.”

The command hung in the air, unexplained.

“Understood,” Vincent said, his voice already sounding miles away. He stepped out, and the door closed behind him with a soft click.

Alastor stood in his office, listening to Vincent's footsteps recede down the hallway. The elevator dinged. Descended. Silence returned.

He walked back to his desk and sat down heavily.

That had been unpleasant. More hostile than he'd intended, though not more hostile than Vincent had perhaps deserved. But still. He'd let his irritation show more clearly than was professional. Had been deliberately cutting in ways that served no purpose except satisfying his own sense of disgust.

Not his finest moment.

He picked up his broadcast script, trying to refocus on the evening's work. But his mind kept circling back to the conversation. To Vincent's face when he had called him obsessive. To the desperate intensity in his voice when he'd asked what Alastor wanted from him.

To the uncomfortable awareness that he'd probably just made their working relationship significantly more complicated.

The intercom on his desk buzzed. The booth technician's voice crackled through. "Alastor? We're ready for you whenever you are. Fifteen minutes to air."

"I'll be right there."

Alastor stood, composing his expression back into pleasant professionalism. Whatever had just happened with Vincent, it was done now. Not worth dwelling on when he had a performance to deliver.

Chapter 37

The walk home should have felt like victory.

Vox had achieved something tonight. Had forced Alastor into actual conversation, had demonstrated technical competence once again and had gotten under the man's skin. It was everything he wanted to do and more.

Except it didn't feel like victory. It felt like he'd been flayed.

His feet carried him through the dark streets on autopilot, his hands shoved deep in his coat pockets, his breath misting white in the cold air. The temperature had dropped while he'd been inside the station. The pavement was developing a sheen of frost that caught the lamplight and made each step require careful attention unless he wanted to end up on his ass.

He didn't care about the ice. Barely registered it. His mind was elsewhere, replaying the conversation in Alastor's office on loop, examining every word and gesture and shift in tone.

"If you're not obsessed, Vincent, you're doing a remarkable impression of someone who is."

The words echoed in his skull with perfect clarity, sharper than they'd been in the moment. Each syllable cutting deeper on repetition.

Obsessed.

The accusation sat in his chest like a stone, heavy and cold and impossible to dislodge. Because it was true and that truth was humiliating in ways Vox didn't have the emotional vocabulary to process properly.

He'd abandoned Margaret mid evening. Had lied about being alone when confronted. Had followed Alastor. Had destroyed what was probably a functional relationship for the sake of twenty minutes in an office discussing transmitter specifications that absolutely could have waited until Monday.

The rational part of his brain, the part that had spent decades as an overlord making calculated decisions about resource allocation and strategic partnerships, was screaming that this was insane. That he'd completely lost the plot. That obsession was weakness and weakness was death and he needed to regain control immediately before this spiral destroyed everything he'd been building.

But the larger part of his brain, the part that was apparently driving his behavior now, didn't care about rationality or strategy or any of the careful planning he'd done. That part just wanted more of what had happened in that office.

He'd traded everything for attention. Even when that attention was hostile. Even when it came wrapped in condescension and accusations. Even when it made him feel pathetic and desperate and fundamentally unappealing.

Vox realized he'd stopped walking. Was standing in the middle of the sidewalk, his hand raised to his face, fingers pressing against his cheek. The skin was cold now from the winter air, but he could remember the heat. The way his face had flushed when Alastor had crowded his space, when those eyes had focused on him with sharp predatory intensity.

The memory made his stomach twist with something that felt uncomfortably close to shame. He told himself it had been anger. Embarrassment at being caught in a lie. The physical response to being cornered by someone calling out his behavior in ways he couldn't deflect or deny.

Vox had always been a creature of attention. In Hell, his entire empire had been built on being seen, on commanding focus, on making sure that when people thought about media and influence they thought about him first. Attention was currency, power and validation all rolled into one addictive package.

And Alastor's attention, when it was actually focused and undivided instead of dispersed across pleasant social performance, had always been *very* interesting to him.

He hated that being called obsessive had felt less like an insult and more like acknowledgment. Hated that some part of him had wanted to lean into that accusation instead of defending against it. The impulse had been strong enough that he'd had to physically leave before he did something monumentally stupid like voice it out loud.

Vox dropped his hand from his face and started walking again. His apartment was still six blocks away and standing in the street having revelations about his own psychological state wasn't productive.

A car passed him, its headlights cutting through the darkness before disappearing around a corner. Somewhere in the distance a dog was barking, the sound carrying clearly in the cold night air. The city felt emptier than usual, most sensible people having already found warm places to spend their evening instead of wandering dark streets having emotional crises.

Margaret would be home by now. Probably explaining to her friends why her date had abandoned her mid evening. Maybe crying, though she didn't seem like the type who cried easily. More likely she was angry, righteously furious at the disrespect and humiliation of being left alone at while her supposed boyfriend chased after his business associate.

Vox tried to feel guilty about it. Tried to summon some appropriate remorse for behavior that was objectively terrible by any reasonable social standard.

Nothing came. Just a vague acknowledgment that he'd burned that bridge and would need to deal with the consequences eventually, but dealing with consequences was a future problem and right now he had more pressing concerns occupying his mental bandwidth.

The apartment building appeared ahead, somehow both welcoming and depressing. The key stuck in the lock like it always did, requiring jiggling and cursing before finally turning. The door opened onto darkness and the smell of stale air and the soft bubbling of the fish tank in the corner.

Vox didn't turn on the lights. Just closed the door behind him and stood in the dim apartment, not moving to take off his coat, or his shoes, too exhausted to care.

The floor lamp next to the fish tank cast wavering shadows across the walls. Vox walked toward it automatically, his feet finding the path through the cluttered space without needing to see clearly.

The two guppies were swimming their endless circles. The larger one was stalking the smaller one with patient determination, following it around the tank like a predator that knew its prey had nowhere to hide permanently.

The smaller guppy had lost most of its tail fin now. What remained was ragged and torn, barely functional. It spent most of its time wedged into corners or hiding behind the plastic plant, only emerging when hunger forced it into open water where the larger fish could reach it.

Vox stared at them for a long moment, his brain too blank to form coherent thoughts about the metaphor playing out in miniature in front of him.

Then he turned away and collapsed onto the Murphy bed without bothering to pull it down properly. His shoes stayed on. His coat stayed buttoned. He was too tired to care about comfort or routine or any of the small rituals that separated functional humans from animals.

Sleep should have come immediately. His body was exhausted, his mind was fried, everything hurt in that particular way that suggested he'd pushed himself past reasonable limits without noticing.

But sleep didn't come. Instead he lay there in the darkness, staring at the water stained ceiling, while his brain refused to shut down and let him rest.

The conversation replayed again. And again. Each iteration finding new ways to make him feel worse about himself.

"Chasing me down for a conversation that isn't actually urgent is not professional behavior. It's obsessive."

"Your behavior tonight has been erratic."

"Like someone with questionable priorities."

His eyes burned with that dry exhaustion that came from staring at things without blinking for too long.

The ceiling stains looked like maps of continents that didn't exist. Islands and shorelines of water damage spreading across the plaster in patterns that probably indicated serious structural problems the landlord would never fix.

Vox closed his eyes and tried to force his mind into blankness. Into the empty static that usually came before sleep. But the blankness wouldn't come. Instead his thoughts kept spiraling, kept picking at the evening's events like a tongue probing a sore tooth.

The Bishops had seemed nice. Margaret had been happy before he'd ruined it. The jazz had been genuinely excellent. He could have stayed. Could have finished the evening like a normal person on a date, made appropriate small talk, walked Margaret home, kissed her goodnight with appropriate chasteness.

Could have maintained that useful relationship and the social connections it provided and his standing with the Holloways who still thought he was stable husband material despite mounting evidence to the contrary.

Instead he'd thrown it all away for twenty minutes of being told he was obsessive and pathetic.

Vox realized he wasn't operating as a competent executive right now. Wasn't making decisions based on rational calculation of returns on investment. Was apparently making decisions based on whatever that hot electric feeling in his chest had been when Alastor's attention had focused on him.

That realization was perhaps the worst one of the entire terrible evening. Because it meant he was out of control in ways he hadn't been since his earliest days in hell, back before he'd learned to regulate his emotions and use them as tools instead of letting them use him.

It meant he was becoming someone he didn't recognize, driven by impulses he couldn't articulate and didn't fully understand, making catastrophically stupid decisions while being fully aware they were catastrophically stupid but unable to stop himself from making them anyway.

Vox lay in the darkness and felt the full weight of that understanding settle over him like a shroud.

Somewhere in the building, a radiator clanked to life with its usual protest. Pipes groaned as hot water forced its way through decades of accumulated sediment and rust. The fish tank bubbled its endless rhythm. Outside, the city continued its nighttime symphony of distant sirens and car horns.

Normal sounds. The ambient noise of normal life continuing around him while he lay here having what seemed to be a mental breakdown of some kind.

His eyes opened again, unable to maintain the pretense of sleep.

How long could he maintain this? The dual existence of Vincent Whittman, competent professional weatherman, and whatever he actually was? How long before the mask slipped completely and everyone could see what he actually was underneath?

Margaret had already seen it. The Bishops had probably noticed something off. Alastor had certainly identified it with uncomfortable accuracy.

The isolation of that realization was almost worse than the embarrassment. He had no one to talk to about this. No one who would understand or care or provide useful perspective.

He was completely alone with this, whatever this was.

The thought was paralyzing. Vox lay there feeling the weight of it pressing down on his chest, making breathing difficult, making movement impossible.

He should get up. Should at least take off his shoes and coat. Should feed the fish or drink some water.

But that required energy he didn't have. Required caring about his own welfare enough to take action, and right now he couldn't muster even that basic survival instinct.

The bed's springs dug into his back through the thin mattress. His neck was at an uncomfortable angle from not using the pillow properly. His shoes were tracking dirt onto the sheets. None of it mattered. None of it registered as important enough to address.

Time passed. He wasn't sure how much. The darkness outside deepened into full night. The sounds of the city changed, grew quieter as even the late night activity wound down toward the dead hours between midnight and dawn.

Vox's mind eventually exhausted itself. The spiraling thoughts slowed, lost their intensity, faded into something more like background noise than active torture.

Sleep came finally, not because he'd found any resolution or peace, but because his body simply gave up on consciousness and shut down whether his mind was ready or not.

His dreams, when they came, were fragmented and strange. He was in the office again but the walls were too white, too bright, the furniture replaced by nothing, just empty space that went on forever in all directions. The fish tank was there somehow, enormous now, taking up half the room, and he could see himself reflected in the glass. Except it wasn't himself, it was Vox.

The reflection smiled at him derisively. Asked what the hell he thought he was doing. Demanded to know when Vincent Whittman had become anything other than a convenient disguise for someone who knew better than to let emotions compromise strategic objectives.

Vox tried to answer but his mouth wouldn't work. The words were stuck somewhere between his brain and his throat, bottlenecked by something he couldn't identify or remove.

The reflection laughed and the sound was wrong, too loud, echoing in the empty white space like feedback through speakers pushed past their capacity.

Then the reflection was Alastor instead, looking at him with that focused intensity from the office.

"You're obsessed," the Alastor's reflection said, and the voice was layered with static, multiple frequencies overlapping until the words were almost incomprehensible. "You're pathetic. You're exactly what I said you were."

Vox wanted to argue but the reflection was already dissolving, breaking apart, and the white space was getting brighter, painfully bright, burning his eyes even through closed lids.

"Vox," a new voice said, and this one was worse because it was cheerful. Aggressively, artificially cheerful in that particular way that made Vox want to punch whoever was speaking. "Or should we call you Vincent? You keep switching between them so we're not really sure which one you prefer at this point."

Vox opened his eyes. Or tried to. The brightness was overwhelming, making his head pound, making his eyes water. He was sitting in a chair now, though he didn't remember moving. The white space had resolved into something more defined, walls and floor and ceiling all the same blinding white, like being inside a light bulb.

A figure stood in front of him. Humanoid but wrong in ways that were difficult to articulate. Too symmetrical maybe. Too perfect. The kind of perfection that only happened in fever dreams or places where the normal rules of physical existence didn't quite apply.

The figure tilted its head, studying him. The cheerfulness in its voice intensified, taking on that particular corporate quality that suggested it had been through sensitivity training and really wanted you to know it cared about your concerns.

"So, Vox. Vincent. Vinny. How's the whole 'Correcting the Path' thing going for you? We've been monitoring your progress and wow, some really interesting choices lately. Would you say you're making positive strides toward genuine reformation or would you characterize your trajectory as more of a downward spiral into increasingly desperate behavior?"

Vox tried to stand up but his body wouldn't cooperate. The chair held him in place through forces that had nothing to do with actual physical restraint and everything to do with being in a place where his will simply didn't matter.

"I didn't ask for this," he said, and his voice came out hoarse. Damaged somehow. "I didn't ask to be sent back. I was fine in Hell. I had everything under control."

"Everything except your impulse control apparently." The figure laughed, the sound too bright, too clean, like wind chimes made of crystal. "Let's review your recent activities shall we? Some time ago you attempted to murder a coworker with a pipe. Fortunately our protocol prevented actual harm but the intent was crystal clear. Today you abandoned her mid date to chase after a man you *also* want dead. That's not what we'd call 'progress toward redemption' in case you were wondering. How come every plan of yours contains murder?"

"The Margaret thing wasn't attempted murder. The protocol stopped me before I even attempted it."

"That's not how it works though, does it? The intent was there. The desire to hurt someone who'd done nothing except be mildly annoying. That's the problem, Vincent. You're not actually changing. You're just being prevented from acting on your worst impulses through external force rather than internal growth."

The figure moved closer and Vox could see its face more clearly now. Still too perfect, still inhuman in subtle ways, but recognizable as something approximating angelic.

"You know what happens if you keep trending this way?" The cheerfulness had faded slightly, replaced by something more serious. "You're on track for complete existential erasure. Not Hell, not Heaven, just nothing. Permanent deletion from the universe. Is that really what you want?"

"I want to go back to Hell." Vox heard the words coming out of his mouth and was distantly surprised by how genuine they sounded. How desperate. "Just send me back. The coffee runs and the weather maps and the pretending to care about people's feelings. I can't do another day of this. Just send me back."

"Sorry buddy but you're Exile Only right now. You blew a hole through the Pearly Gates last time you were down there. Made a whole scene. Really upset some people who don't normally get upset. You're too volatile for general population anywhere. You're in quarantine until you demonstrate some capacity for not being a complete disaster."

The brightness was getting worse, or maybe Vox's tolerance for it was decreasing. He squeezed his eyes shut but the light penetrated anyway, burning through his eyelids, making his head pound with increasing intensity.

"How long?" His voice was barely a whisper now. "How long do I have to stay like this?"

"Until you figure it out. Until you actually change instead of just going through the motions while your insides stay exactly as rotten as they've always been. Could be months. Could be years. Could be decades. Time works differently in remedial existence."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only answer we have. You think we enjoy babysitting failed overlords who can't figure out basic empathy? This isn't fun for us either. But those are the rules. You get your second chance and you either use it properly or you get deleted. No third options."

The brightness intensified until it was physically painful, like staring directly into the sun, like being inside an explosion frozen at the moment of maximum intensity.

"One more thing before you wake up," the figure's voice echoed from everywhere at once, omnidirectional and impossible to locate. "You're lucky you're not already dead. You have friends in high places who are advocating for you. People who think you deserve this chance even though you've done nothing to earn it. Try not to disappoint them more than you already have."

The light went supernova bright and Vox jerked awake with a gasp.

Six in the morning. The cheap alarm clock on his desk was ringing with aggressive cheerfulness, its mechanical bells shattering the pre dawn quiet.

Vox lay there gasping, his heart hammering against his ribs hard enough to hurt, his skin soaked with cold sweat despite the apartment's freezing temperature. The dream, vision, whatever the hell that had been, clung to his consciousness with the persistence of something that had actually happened rather than something his subconscious had manufactured.

He sat up slowly, his body protesting every movement. His neck was stiff from sleeping at a wrong angle. His back ached from the Murphy bed's springs. His head pounded with the intensity that suggested either dehydration or divine intervention, possibly both.

The fish tank bubbled in the corner, its occupants swimming their morning circuits as if nothing had changed. As if their owner hadn't just been threatened with existential erasure by what might have been actual angels or might have been a stress induced hallucination.

Vox stood on shaking legs and walked to the bathroom. Splashed cold water on his face with hands that trembled. Stared at his reflection in the spotted mirror and tried to determine if he was losing his mind or if the heaven really was monitoring him, ready to delete him permanently if he didn't figure out how to be a better person.

The reflection stared back with bloodshot eyes and a haggard expression that suggested the question might be moot. Losing his mind or being monitored by divine forces, either way he

looked terrible and felt worse.

He needed to get ready for work. Needed to face Margaret and whatever consequences awaited him there. Needed to maintain the Vincent Whittman persona despite feeling like that persona was unraveling faster than he could repair it.

Needed to figure out what the hell he was going to do about Alastor, who had commanded him to appear at his office today for reasons Vox couldn't begin to guess.

Vox turned away from the mirror and started getting ready for work with mechanical efficiency. Shower, shave, dress in clothes that were clean enough to pass inspection. The routine was automatic, required no conscious thought, left his mind free to spiral through increasingly dark scenarios about what awaited him at the station.

The walk to work was cold and miserable. Gray skies threatening snow that wouldn't quite commit. Wind cutting through his coat. The streets busy with Monday morning traffic, everyone rushing to jobs they probably hated, trapped in lives they'd never quite intended to live.

Vox felt a kinship with them that was deeply uncomfortable. He'd always thought of himself as separate from the masses, above the mundane struggles of ordinary people. But walking through the morning crowd he realized he looked exactly like them. Just another exhausted worker heading to another day of tedious labor, distinguishable from everyone else only by the depth of his specific issues.

The station loomed ahead, its familiar exterior somehow even more depressing than usual. Vox climbed the steps slowly, each one requiring conscious effort.

The lobby was busy with morning activity. People hurrying past with coffee cups and paperwork. The usual chaos of a workplace ramping up for another day.

Vox made it three steps inside before he saw her.

Margaret was at the reception desk, talking to the secretary. She looked tired but put together, her hair perfectly styled, her makeup carefully applied. Professional and composed in ways that made Vox's disheveled state feel even more obvious by contrast.

Their eyes met across the lobby. For a moment neither of them moved.

Then Margaret excused herself from her conversation and walked toward him with the determined stride of someone who'd been waiting for this confrontation and was ready to get it over with.

Vox's first instinct was to leave. To turn around and walk back out of the building and just not deal with this until he'd had more time to prepare.

But his feet stayed planted. Some deeply buried sense of obligation or shame or basic human decency that he'd thought he'd lost decades ago kept him there while Margaret approached with that particular expression that meant she was disappointed in him.

"Vincent." Her voice was quiet but carried clearly in the lobby's ambient noise. "We need to talk."

"I know." His own voice sounded flat. Lifeless. "I'm sorry about last night. I had a work emergency and couldn't get back in time."

The lie was transparent and they both knew it. Margaret's expression didn't change but something in her eyes suggested she was cataloging this as yet another disappointment in a growing list.

"A work emergency. At a jazz club. On Sunday night." Her tone was completely neutral. Not angry or hurt or anything that would have been easier to respond to. "That's what you're going with?"

"It's the truth."

"Vincent." She paused, seeming to gather herself. "I told my parents you got food poisoning. That you were embarrassed about it and left quickly without wanting to make a scene. They believed me because they have no reason not to. The Bishops were confused but I smoothed it over. Your reputation with my family and our social circle is intact for now."

The emphasis on "for now" was subtle but unmistakable.

"Thank you," Vox said, because that seemed like the appropriate response even though he felt nothing resembling actual gratitude.

"Don't thank me. I didn't do it for you." Margaret's voice was still quiet but had developed an edge. "I did it because I don't want my parents thinking I'm the kind of woman who picks partners who run away mid date. That reflects badly on me. My judgment. My ability to assess character."

Vox stood there, his hands in his pockets, his brain too empty to formulate any kind of defense or excuse or manipulation that might salvage this.

"I understand," he said finally.

"Do you?" Margaret leaned in slightly, her voice dropping even lower. "Because from where I'm standing, I don't think you understand much of anything right now. You're acting strange, Vincent. Stranger than usual. And I'm trying to be patient because I know you're under a lot of stress at work, but there are limits to patience and you're testing them."

She pulled back, her expression settling back into professional neutrality. "I have to get to my desk. We'll talk more later when you've had time to think about whether this relationship is actually what you want or if I'm just convenient cover for whatever else you have going on."

She walked away before he could respond, her heels clicking on the linoleum with decisive finality.

Vox watched her go and felt absolutely nothing. No guilt, no remorse, no impulse to chase after her and try to fix it. Just a vague acknowledgment that he'd probably need to have an actual conversation with her eventually but that eventually could wait until he had more mental bandwidth to care.

He continued to his desk, settling into the familiar chair, staring at the familiar clutter of weather maps and isobar charts that needed updating. The routine tasks that comprised his actual job. The thing he was supposedly here to do instead of obsessing over radio hosts and revolutionary technology and divine intervention.

The time Alastor had commanded him to appear at his office came and went.

Vox stayed in his chair.

He felt the pull. The electric itch of wanting to go, wanting to see what Alastor wanted.

But the smart part of his brain was staging a rebellion. Was insisting that showing up when commanded was exactly the kind of obsessive behavior Alastor had called out. Was demanding that for once he demonstrate some capacity for self control and strategic distance.

If he was obsessed, he'd show what happened when he lost interest instead.

The decision felt powerful in the moment. A reassertion of control over his own behavior. Proof that he wasn't actually as pathetic as last night had made him feel.

He pulled out a fresh weather map and started updating the pressure systems. Drew careful lines connecting points of equal barometric pressure. Made notations about wind patterns and moisture content and all the minutiae that went into predicting whether it would rain tomorrow.

The work was meditative. Required just enough attention to keep his mind from spiraling while being simple enough to do on autopilot. Perfect busy work for someone who was trying very hard not to think about what he was deliberately not doing.

Another hour flew by. No summons from Alastor. No angry phone call demanding to know why Vincent hadn't appeared as commanded. Just silence and the normal chaos of the station going about its Monday business.

Another hour. Still nothing. Vox finished the weather map and started filing old reports, organizing them by date and type with obsessive precision that probably wasn't actually necessary but gave him something to focus on besides the growing hollow feeling in his chest.

The afternoon was slipping away. The evening broadcast would start in a few hours. If Alastor actually cared about Vincent's absence he would have said something by now. Would have sent Barbara or dropped by himself or at minimum shown some sign that the disobedience had registered.

But there was nothing. Just the usual station rhythm continuing undisturbed around him.

By seven o'clock, when Vox normally would have been packing up to leave, he realized what the silence actually meant.

Alastor hadn't noticed. Or had noticed and didn't care. The command to appear had been casual rather than serious, tossed out without any real expectation of obedience or concern about whether it would be followed.

Vincent's grand gesture of rebellion had landed in complete vacuum. Unwitnessed and unmourned and ultimately meaningless.

The realization was worse than being called obsessive had been. Because being obsessive implied he mattered enough to be concerned about. But this silence suggested he didn't matter at all. Was just background noise in Alastor's day, easily dismissed and quickly forgotten.

Vox stared at his desk, at the carefully organized weather reports, at the completed map that represented hours of meticulous work. All of it suddenly feeling pointless.

Chapter 38

The blankness from Monday night didn't fade.

Tuesday morning arrived with Vox still at his desk, staring at the phone that hadn't rung, except now the edges of his vision were doing something strange. Blurring and sharpening in waves that didn't correspond to his breathing or his heartbeat or any rhythm he could identify. The fluorescent lights overhead had developed halos, fuzzy coronas of light that pulsed with each blink.

He'd come in early, before anyone else arrived, because sleep had been impossible and lying in his apartment staring at the ceiling had felt worse than pretending to work. The station was quiet at this hour, just the hum of equipment and the distant clank of radiators struggling against the cold.

The hum was getting louder. Or his tolerance for it was decreasing. The familiar white noise of the building's electrical systems had transformed into something more aggressive, a feedback loop that made his teeth ache and his skull feel too small for his brain.

Vox pressed his palms against his eyes, trying to reset whatever was malfunctioning in his visual processing. When he pulled them away, the halos were worse. The desk lamp looked like a dying star, its light spreading in concentric circles that hurt to look at directly.

He had work to do. The Miller Brothers account needed attention, Margaret had mentioned something about revised advertising schedules last week, though the specific details were fuzzy now, buried under layers of exhaustion and whatever was happening to his sensory input.

The coffee cart arrived at six thirty, its wheels squeaking on the linoleum with a sound that made Vox's stomach lurch. The smell hit him a moment later, rich and bitter and somehow wrong, like burnt rubber instead of coffee beans. His mouth flooded with saliva in that particular way that preceded vomiting.

He swallowed hard, forcing his body to cooperate, and turned his attention back to the weather map in front of him. The isobar lines needed to be drawn connecting points of equal atmospheric pressure. It was simple work, something he'd done hundreds of times and could do in his sleep.

Except the numbers weren't making sense. He stared at the data points, trying to parse the information, but his brain kept sliding off the task like trying to grip ice with wet hands. The pressure readings looked normal individually but refused to cohere into any recognizable pattern.

He drew a line anyway, connecting two points that seemed like they should connect. Then another. The lines curved across the map in patterns that looked approximately correct, though something in the back of his mind was telling him that he was getting this backwards, that high pressure didn't work that way, that he was producing weather predictions that bore no relationship to actual meteorological reality.

By nine o'clock, when the rest of the staff started filtering in, Vox had completed three maps that would probably get him fired if anyone bothered to check them against actual atmospheric conditions. He stared at his work with detached confusion, unable to identify what specifically was wrong but certain that something was deeply incorrect about what he'd produced.

The typewriters started up as people settled into their desks. The familiar clatter that usually faded into background noise was aggressive today, each keystroke landing with percussion that reverberated through his skull. Worse, they seemed to be synchronizing, multiple typewriters finding the same rhythm, merging into a mechanical heartbeat that matched his own pulse until he couldn't tell where his body ended and the office noise began.

Sterling's voice cut through the din, bellowing something about ad placements. The sound felt like broken glass dragged across Vox's eardrums.

Tuesday passed in a haze of sensory distortion and barely maintained competence. He made it through the morning broadcast segment by reading directly from notes he'd prepared the previous week, his voice sounding strange and distant even to his own ears, like listening to himself through a bad radio connection. Margaret walked past his desk twice without

acknowledging his existence, her heels clicking on the linoleum with sounds that felt deliberately loud, designed to remind him of her presence.

He wanted to care about that. Should *probably* care about that. But his brain couldn't spare the processing power for interpersonal drama when it was struggling to maintain basic sensory coherence.

By Wednesday, things had gotten worse.

The fever arrived sometime during the night, though Vox didn't recognize it as fever initially. Just thought the apartment's heating had malfunctioned, was pumping too much heat into his room while simultaneously failing to actually warm anything. He woke up soaked in sweat, his sheets damp and cold against his skin, shivering despite feeling like he was burning from the inside out.

The walk to work was a nightmare of physical sensation he'd forgotten was possible. Every block felt exponentially longer than the last, the winter wind cutting through his coat, finding every gap in his clothing and exploiting it. His cheap wool suit, already damp with sweat, felt like it weighed fifty pounds, the fabric clinging to his skin in ways that made him want to tear it off despite the freezing temperature.

He was disgusting. The awareness of his own physical degradation was acute and humiliating in ways he hadn't experienced in decades.

The newsroom lights had evolved beyond simple halos into full pulsing orbs of static, like watching television screens filled with white noise except the noise had texture and weight and seemed to be pressing against his eyeballs from the inside. He kept his eyes mostly closed, squinting at his work through narrow slits that reduced the sensory input to barely manageable levels.

The weather maps he produced Wednesday were worse than Tuesday's. He got fronts backwards, marked high pressure where low pressure should be, predicted sunshine for systems that were obviously going to produce rain. The mistakes were fundamental, the kind of errors that anyone would catch immediately, but his brain couldn't maintain the concentration required to correct them.

Sterling walked past at one point, paused to look at Vox's work, opened his mouth like he was going to say something, then apparently thought better of it and kept walking. Even through the feverish haze, Vox registered that as significant. Sterling never let incompetent work slide without comment. The fact that he'd walked away without yelling suggested Vox must look even worse than he felt.

Margaret remained a ghost. She'd perfected the art of being present without acknowledging him, moving through the office like he'd ceased to exist in any meaningful way. On Thursday afternoon she walked past his desk on her way to the break room, her attention fixed on something in the distance, her posture radiating deliberate indifference.

She emerged from the break room minutes later with a steaming cup of coffee, still maintaining that careful distance, still pretending he wasn't there. But then something changed. She slowed as she passed his desk, her eyes catching on something, her expression shifting from coldness to genuine concern in the space of a heartbeat.

Vox was slumped over a weather chart, his forehead nearly touching the paper, one hand still holding a pencil that had stopped moving sometime in the last few minutes. He hadn't realized he'd stopped working. Hadn't noticed the way his body had simply given up on maintaining upright posture.

Margaret's footsteps stopped. The click of her heels on linoleum ceased abruptly, replaced by silence that stretched long enough to register as unusual.

Then she was there, standing beside his desk, and before Vox could muster the energy to straighten up or pretend he was fine, her hand touched his forehead.

The contact was electric in the wrong way, the contrast between her cold palm and the temperature of his skin was sharp enough to sting. There was nothing romantic in it, nothing even friendly. It was the kind of touch born purely of concern, instinctive and urgent, caused by genuine worry rather than affection.

"Vincent?" Her voice had lost all its careful distance, replaced by alarm that sounded sincere. "Oh my god. You're burning up."

Margaret's hand moved from his forehead to his shoulder, gripping with surprising strength. "Come on. Up. We're going to Sterling's office right now."

"I'm fine." The words finally emerged, slurred and unconvincing. "Just tired. Need coffee."

"You need a doctor. Or at minimum you need to not be here infecting everyone else." She pulled at his shoulder, trying to get him upright. "Vincent, work with me here. Stand up."

His body obeyed before his brain finished processing the command. Margaret hooked her arm under his, taking most of his weight as he stumbled to his feet. The office tilted sickeningly, the floor refusing to stay level, but Margaret held him steady with grip that suggested experience hauling drunk people around.

The walk to Sterling's office was humiliating. People stared as they passed, conversations stopping mid sentence, the spectacle of Margaret half carrying the weatherman through the newsroom apparently worth interrupting work to observe. Vox kept his eyes down, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other, trying not to notice the weight of all that attention.

Sterling's door was closed. Margaret didn't bother knocking, just pushed it open and guided Vox inside.

Sterling sat behind his desk with a cigar smoldering in the ashtray, papers spread in front of him in chaotic patterns that suggested he'd been reviewing ad buys or budget projections or something equally tedious. He looked up ready to bark at whoever had interrupted him without permission, but the words died when he saw Vox's face.

"Jesus, Whittman." Sterling's cigar hung forgotten in his hand, smoke curling toward the ceiling. "You look like you've been pulled out of a gutter."

"He has a massive fever, sir." Margaret's voice was firm, brooking no argument. "He needs to go home."

Sterling studied Vox with an expression that was difficult to parse. Not anger or disgust or the usual irritation. Something closer to genuine concern, which was so unexpected that Vox's brain struggled to process it.

"She's right." Sterling set down his cigar with careful precision. "Son, look at you. I can't put that face on camera. The viewers will think we're broadcasting from an asylum. Go home. Get some soup. Don't come back until you're not gray."

The words landed wrong. He'd expected yelling. Expected consequences for the terrible work he'd been producing, for failing to maintain basic professional standards. Expected to be fired or at minimum subjected to another humiliating lecture about knowing his place and staying in his lane.

But Sterling was giving him sick leave. Was treating him like a human being who deserved rest and recovery rather than a malfunctioning piece of office equipment that needed to be discarded.

The cognitive dissonance was jarring enough to cut through some of the fever fog. These people saw him as a person. Not a tool or an asset or a convenient pawn, but an actual human who could get sick and needed care.

When had that happened? When had he stopped being separate and superior to the masses, and become Vincent Whittman, weatherman, someone whose absence would be noticed and whose welfare mattered to his coworkers?

"Do you need help getting home?" Margaret's voice pulled him back from wherever his thoughts had drifted. "I can call a cab if you need one."

"I can walk." The words came out automatically, defensive pride overriding practical sense. "It's not far."

"Vincent." Margaret's tone had shifted into something firmer, the voice of someone dealing with a stubborn patient who refused to acknowledge obvious reality. "You can barely stand. Let me call a cab."

"I'll walk." He pulled away from her support, swaying but managing to stay upright through sheer willpower. "Thank you for your concern but I'm capable of getting myself home."

The walk proved him a liar within three blocks.

The winter wind, which had been merely unpleasant on previous days, became a physical assault, each gust threatening to knock him off balance, to send him sprawling onto pavement that looked increasingly inviting as a place to simply lie down and stop fighting.

His coat, soaked with sweat despite the freezing temperature, had transformed into a wet blanket wrapped around him, heavy and suffocating. The wool stuck to his shirt which stuck to his skin, creating layers of damp misery that made every movement feel like wading through mud.

The apartment building appeared ahead like salvation. Vox climbed the stairs with hands gripping the railing, pulling himself up each step, his legs threatening to give out at any second. Mrs. Kowalski's door opened as he passed but he didn't look, couldn't spare the attention required for social interaction, just kept moving toward his own door at the end of the hallway.

The key stuck in the lock. His hands were shaking too badly to jiggle it properly, his fingers clumsy and uncooperative. After what felt like hours but was probably thirty seconds, the lock finally turned and he stumbled inside.

The apartment was dark and smelled like stale air and fish food and the particular mustiness of a space that hadn't been properly ventilated in days. The fish tank bubbled in the corner, its occupants swimming their usual circles, oblivious to their owner's deteriorating condition.

Vox stood in the doorway, swaying, his brain trying to generate a plan for what came next. He should eat something. Should drink water. Should take off these wet clothes before they

gave him pneumonia on top of whatever was already destroying his immune system.

But his attention had locked onto something else. The phone table near the wall, the rotary phone sitting silent and accusatory on its surface.

He couldn't reach it from the bed. If it rang while he was sleeping, he'd have to get up, cross the room, potentially miss the call entirely if he wasn't fast enough.

The solution was obvious. He grabbed the table's edge with both hands and pulled. The legs scraped across the linoleum with a screech that probably woke the entire floor, but he didn't care. Pulled again, the table moving in jerking increments across the room, the phone rattling with each movement.

By the time he'd positioned it next to the Murphy bed, sweat was pouring down his face despite his shivering, his breath coming in harsh gasps that hurt his chest. But the phone was within reach now. If it rang, he could answer without leaving the bed.

If Alastor called, he'd be ready.

The thought should have felt pathetic. Should have triggered some recognition of how far he'd fallen, how desperate he'd become. But his brain couldn't spare processing power for self awareness when it was struggling to coordinate basic motor functions.

He stripped off the wet clothes with clumsy hands, dropping them in a heap on the floor and collapsed onto the Murphy bed in his underwear, pulling the thin blanket over himself with movements that felt weighted and slow, like moving through molasses.

His head landed on the pillow with his face turned toward the phone. The receiver sat in its cradle, black and silent and utterly unhelpful.

Sleep came immediately despite the fever, his body simply shutting down whether his mind was ready or not.

The dreams were vivid and strange, bleeding into hallucinations that felt more real than the waking world. The fish tank loomed large in his peripheral vision, its glass walls distorting the room's dimensions, making everything seem curved and wrong.

The two guppies were visible even with his eyes closed, burned into his retinas from hours of observation. The larger one hovered over the smaller one with predatory focus, stalking its wounded prey with patient determination.

The smaller guppy, the victim that had spent weeks being systematically destroyed, suddenly lunged forward with impossible speed. Its tiny mouth opened impossibly wide, revealing rows of teeth that fish definitely didn't have, certainly not guppies, definitely not in this timeline.

It tore into the larger fish with violence that was shocking in its intensity. The water turned pink, then red, then nearly black with blood that spread through the tank like ink in water. The larger fish thrashed but couldn't escape, couldn't fight back, just slowly disintegrated under the relentless assault while the smaller fish fed with single minded focus.

Vox watched this with detached horror, unable to look away, unable to close his eyes because they were already closed.

The tank's water was completely opaque now, dark and churning with violence. He could hear sounds that fish definitely couldn't make, wet tearing rips, cartilage giving way, bones snapping with dull, meaty crunches.

He jerked awake with a gasp, his heart hammering, his body soaked with fresh sweat despite the shivering that rattled his teeth together.

The fish tank sat in the corner, its water clear and normal, both guppies swimming their usual circuits completely intact. No blood, no violence, just two fish coexisting in their too small prison the way they always did.

The hallucination's vividness was disturbing. Vox lay there breathing hard, trying to convince his brain that what he'd seen wasn't real, that it had been fever dream rather than prophecy or divine warning or whatever his compromised consciousness wanted to interpret it as.

The phone sat silent beside him. Still hadn't rung. Still offered no salvation or connection or acknowledgment that he existed in anyone's awareness.

The hollow feeling in his chest intensified, spreading outward until his entire torso felt empty, carved out, a cavity where something important should be but wasn't. Not the sadness of a failed business deal or a lost contract. Something more primal and animal. The sadness of a dying creature alone in its hole, waiting for help that wouldn't come.

He thought about Alastor. About their last interaction, the hostility and accusations and the command to appear Monday morning that Vox had deliberately ignored. About the silence that had followed, the complete absence of follow up or consequence or even acknowledgment that the command had been issued.

He thought about Margaret. About her concern today, the way she'd touched his forehead with genuine worry despite having every reason to maintain her cold distance. About how she'd helped him to Sterling's office even though he'd abandoned her without explanation or apology.

The anger surprised him with its intensity. A hot spike of rage cutting through the fever fog, sharp enough to briefly restore clarity.

Why weren't they checking on him? Why was he here alone while his body systematically failed, while his fever climbed to dangerous levels, while he potentially died in this shitty apartment with only fish for company?

Alastor had commanded him to appear Monday morning, had created an expectation of contact, and then had simply gone silent when Vox failed to show.

Margaret had been concerned for exactly the duration required to get him home, but apparently not concerned enough to actually verify he'd made it safely or to check whether he

needed anything beyond vague suggestions about soup.

The anger built on itself, feeding into a spiral of resentment and self pity that felt justified in the moment. He'd been manipulating both of them, true, had been using them for his own purposes without genuine care for their welfare. But that didn't mean they got to ignore him when he was actually in distress, actually needed something approximating human connection or concern.

The thoughts were circular and went nowhere productive. Vox recognized this with the distant part of his brain that was still capable of meta analysis, but couldn't stop the spiral once it had started. Anger at Alastor bled into anger at Margaret bled into anger at himself for caring, for needing, for failing to maintain the cold detachment that had served him so well in hell.

He needed to pull himself together. Needed to stop wallowing in this pathetic self pity and start acting like himself rather than the dying animal he currently felt like. Needed to remember that he'd built an empire from nothing, had clawed his way to power through intelligence and determination and refusal to let setbacks become defeats.

This was just a setback. A temporary physical ailment that would pass given time and rest. Once the fever broke, once his body recovered from whatever virus or infection had compromised it, he'd get back to work on his plans. Would continue building toward the future he'd envisioned, the restoration of his power and influence through technology and manipulation.

He just needed to survive the night. To make it through this fever. To maintain enough awareness to function like a normal human being who could handle basic illness without falling apart completely.

The phone rang.

The sound was shocking in the quiet apartment, mechanical and aggressive, cutting through Vox's fever addled thoughts. His body moved before his brain finished processing, hand shooting out to grab the receiver before the second ring could complete.

"Hello?" His voice was hoarse, damaged, barely recognizable even to himself.

“Vincent.” Alastor’s voice came through with perfect clarity, the usual theatrical warmth set aside for something cooler and more precise. “I was expecting you Monday morning. You didn’t come. Can you explain why you chose not to?”

The words should have triggered anger or defensiveness or some calculated response designed to salvage the situation.

"...I was busy."

Silence stretched across the line. Vox could hear faint background noise, the hum of radio equipment, suggesting Alastor was calling from the station rather than home. That, somehow, made it worse.

“Busy,” Alastor repeated mildly.

“Yes,” Vox snapped, the word coming out sharper than he intended. “You don’t own every minute of my time. I assumed if it was truly important, you would’ve followed up.”

"That's remarkably childish." Alastor's tone carried amusement rather than anger. "Why would I follow up when I gave you explicit instructions on where and when to show up? The logic is backwards."

"The logic is fine. You're just..."

Another pause. Longer this time. Vox closed his eyes, his free hand pressing against his forehead which was still burning despite the shivering that rattled his entire frame.

"Are you drunk?" Alastor's voice had shifted, the amusement fading into something more cautious. "You sound different today."

"I'm sick." The admission came automatically, too tired to maintain pretense. "Have been for days. Fever. Possibly dying. Haven't decided yet."

“Are you alone?” The question was perfectly neutral, stripped of concern. “Is there anyone with you?”

"Just the fish. And they're terrible company. The small one's dying slowly while the big one eats it piece by piece and I should probably do something about that."

“I see,” Alastor said at last.

A beat.

“Do you have anyone who can check on you?” he continued, voice still even, though the question itself felt like a recalibration. “Friends? Family? Your lady friend from the jazz club?"

The mention of Margaret made Vox laugh, that wet cough sound again. "She's busy."

"That's rather bleak."

"It is."

Silence again. Vox let his eyes close, the phone pressed to his ear, waiting for whatever came next. The fever was making time feel elastic and strange, seconds stretching into minutes or compressing into nothing, impossible to gauge how long the silence actually lasted.

"Vincent." The name came out sharp, exasperated. "If you need one, call one. I'll cover the cost if necessary."

The offer landed strange, unexpected enough that Vox's compromised brain struggled to process it. "How generous. What's the occasion?"

"You dying would be inconvenient for the project timeline and finding a replacement engineer with your specific knowledge would take months I don't have."

It was probably nothing. The fever had a way of inserting meaning where there was none. And yet Vox found himself imagining a trace of concern beneath the clinical reasoning, something Alastor would never admit to. He knew it wasn’t real. He let himself believe it regardless.

"I'll try not to die then," Vox said flatly. "Wouldn't want to inconvenience your timeline."

"See that you don't." Another pause. "Check in with Barbara tomorrow. Let her know your status. She can relay messages if anything urgent comes up regarding the project."

"Always Barbara. Never you directly."

"We've discussed this."

"We've discussed many things. Doesn't mean I have to like your conclusions."

"Your preferences are noted and disregarded. Get some rest, Vincent. We'll discuss Monday's absence once you're capable of coherent conversation."

The line went dead before Vox could respond. Alastor had hung up, returning to his preparations for the evening broadcast, leaving Vox alone in his apartment with instructions to not die and a promise of future discussion about his failures.

Vox let the receiver fall back into its cradle and stared at the ceiling. The water stains looked different in the darkness, more organic somehow, like living things spreading across the plaster rather than just evidence of structural decay.

Alastor had called. Had asked about his welfare in that detached professional way that suggested he cared about project timelines more than human life but had still bothered to ask at all. Had offered to pay for an ambulance if necessary, framing it as business expense but making the offer regardless.

It wasn't comfort exactly. Wasn't the warmth of genuine human connection or concern. But it was something. Acknowledgment that Vox existed, that his absence had been noticed, that someone in the world was tracking his survival as a variable worth monitoring.

The hollow feeling in his chest felt fractionally less empty. Not filled, but less like a void consuming everything around it.

Vox pulled the blanket tighter and let himself drift back into fever sleep, the phone silent beside him, having fulfilled its purpose of providing that bare minimum connection to the world outside his deteriorating apartment.

Chapter 39

The knocking started as a distant sound, something Vox's feverish brain tried to incorporate into whatever nightmare he was having, but it grew steadily louder, sharper, and more insistent.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Vox jerked awake with a gasp, his body responding before his conscious mind could catch up. The movement sent his head spinning, the room tilting sickeningly before slowly stabilizing. He lay there for a moment, breathing hard, trying to understand whether the knocking was real or just another auditory hallucination, courtesy of his compromised immune system.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

It was real then. Someone was actually at his door.

His brain, still sluggish from days of fever and isolation, leaped to the most illogical conclusion possible with the kind of desperate hope that should have embarrassed him but surprisingly didn't.

Alastor had actually came to check on him.

He scrambled upright, nearly tripping over the phone cord he'd forgotten was still stretched across the floor. His hands found the mattress edge, gripping hard as the room decided to spin again despite his best efforts. The movement jostled the bedframe, making the springs protest with their usual metallic screech.

He caught his reflection in the fish tank's glass as he stood and the image that stared back was horrifying enough to register despite the brain fog.

He looked like death. His hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat, sticking up at odd angles where he'd slept on it wrong. His face was pale except for the flush spreading across his cheeks and nose. His eyes were bloodshot and glazed, the dark circles underneath them so pronounced they looked like bruises.

The panic that gripped him was immediate. He couldn't let Alastor see him like this. Actually he couldn't let *anyone* see him like this, but especially not Alastor.

Vox ran his hands through his hair frantically, trying to smooth down the worst of it. The attempt was futile, his hair immediately springing back the moment his hands moved away. He grabbed a discarded undershirt from the floor, one that was slightly less disgusting than the one he was wearing, and wiped at his face with aggressively. He forced himself to stand tall despite his legs threatening to give out, straightening his spine through sheer force of will.

The knocking came again, louder now, more impatient.

"Boy, are you alive in there or what?"

The voice made him pause momentarily.

That wasn't Alastor's voice, not even close. Vox stood frozen in the middle of his apartment, still holding the gross undershirt, his hair still sticking up at impossible angles, feeling stupid.

He walked to the door on autopilot, his movements slow and mechanical. Unlocked it and pulled it open to reveal exactly who he should have expected all along.

Mrs. Kowalski stood in the hallway wearing a faded floral nightrobe that had probably been purchased sometime during the previous decade and had miraculously survived. Her gray

hair was wrapped in curlers, her brow furrowed. She held a tray in one hand, the cheap metal kind with a floral pattern that matched nothing, containing a bowl of soup and what looked like loose pills scattered across the surface.

"I heard you dragging furniture across the floor few days ago when I was trying to take my midday nap, Whittman," she barked without preamble, not waiting for invitation or greeting or any of the normal social niceties people usually employed when interacting with their neighbors. "And then silence for days! I thought you'd finally kicked the bucket. I don't want a corpse smelling up the hallway, it'll bring down the property value!"

She shoved the tray into his hands with enough force that he had to take a step back to avoid dropping it. The soup sloshed dangerously close to the rim but didn't quite spill. The pills rolled across the metal surface with small clicking sounds.

"Eat all of it and bring me the bowl later," she commanded, already turning away. Her slippers shuffled against the hallway floor as she headed back toward her own apartment, muttering something under her breath about young people and their complete lack of survival skills.

Vox stood in his doorway holding the tray, watching her retreat, his brain struggling to process what had just happened. The door at the end of the hall opened and closed with a loud bang. He was alone again, holding soup he hadn't asked for, staring at pills of unknown origin and purpose.

He kicked his door closed and carried the tray to his small kitchen table, setting it down with carefully. The soup was still steaming slightly, suggesting she'd made it recently rather than reheating something from her refrigerator. The pills, on closer inspection, looked like standard aspirin, the kind you could buy at any drugstore, nothing special.

Vox sat down and stared at the offering, his mind trying to work through the logic of what had just occurred.

Why would she do this?

People didn't just give things away. There was always an exchange, always some transaction occurring beneath the surface of apparent generosity. Sterling was nice because he needed the Miller Brothers account to succeed. Margaret had been nice because she was scouting for husband material, evaluating whether Vincent Whittman met her criteria. Even the Bishops' friendliness had been strategic, networking with someone who worked in broadcasting and might be useful to their business interests down the line.

But Mrs. Kowalski? What did she possibly stand to gain from feeding her sick neighbor?

He stirred the soup with the spoon she'd provided, watching the vegetables and noodles swirl through the broth. The smell was actually good, rich and savory in ways that made his empty stomach grumble with sudden hunger. But he couldn't eat it yet.

Maybe she was lonely. Maybe she needed someone to talk to and was using the soup as an excuse to establish more regular contact. That made more sense. Old women living alone often struggled with isolation, sought out any excuse for human interaction. He could work with that, could provide occasional conversation in exchange for periodic food delivery.

Or maybe this was about reputation. If he died in his apartment and started decomposing, it would reflect badly on her. Other tenants might think she was the kind of neighbor who didn't notice when people were in distress, didn't step in to help. The soup was preemptive damage control for her social standing in the building.

Or, the simplest and most realistic explanation, she actually had been serious about property values. A death in the building would be disclosed to future tenants, might make people hesitant to rent here, might give the landlord an excuse to lower rent across the board to compensate for the morbid history. She was protecting her investment in this shabby apartment building by ensuring her neighbors didn't die preventable deaths.

That last one felt right. Vox sighed with relief, the tension leaving his shoulders as the transaction finally made sense. She wasn't being nice, she was being practical. She had calculated the cost of a bowl of soup and some aspirin against the potential loss if he died and created problems for the building, and the soup had won on pure economic grounds.

Once he'd convinced himself it was a trade, that there were clear rational motivations rather than messy altruism or genuine concern, he could finally trust her motives enough to eat.

The soup was excellent. Better than anything he'd managed to consume in days, possibly better than anything he'd eaten since moving into this apartment. The broth was rich and salty, the vegetables were cooked to perfect tenderness, the noodles had that ideal texture that only came from someone who actually knew how to make soup rather than just dumping ingredients together and hoping for the best.

Vox ate slowly, letting his stomach adjust to actual food after days of barely managing water and the occasional piece of bread. The warmth spread through his chest in ways that felt almost medicinal, easing some of the ache that had taken up residence in his ribcage.

For the first time in days, things made sense. The world operated on clear logic again, on understandable motivations. Mrs. Kowalski wasn't some mystifying example of human generosity. She was just another rational person making practical decisions based on self interest.

The soup bowl was nearly empty when his thoughts shifted to Alastor.

The phone call from yesterday echoed in his memory with uncomfortable clarity. The offer to pay for an ambulance, framed as business expense but still offered. The instruction to check in with Barbara. The promise of future discussion about Monday's absence.

Alastor had noticed. Had cared enough about Vincent's disappearance to follow up, to verify he was still alive, to ensure the project wouldn't be derailed by his contractor dying from preventable illness.

Vox set down his spoon and stared at the cooling soup, his mind working through the same kind of analysis he'd just applied to Mrs. Kowalski's motivations.

Alastor wanted something from him. That much was obvious. The technology Vincent was developing represented significant competitive advantage, the kind of edge that could transform Alastor's position in the broadcasting industry as well as enable him to indulge in his extracurricular activities. Of course he'd want to protect that investment, ensure his contractor stayed functional long enough to deliver results.

The insistence on working specifically with Vincent suggested the value wasn't just in the technology itself but in Vincent's particular combination of knowledge and capability.

Which meant Vincent had leverage.

The realization settled over him with satisfying weight, solid and real in ways that pushed back against the hollow feeling that had dominated his consciousness for days.

He'd been thinking about this wrong. Had been so focused on feeling rejected and ignored and pathetic that he'd lost sight of the fundamental power dynamic. He wasn't a supplicant begging for Alastor's attention. He was a specialist providing services that couldn't be easily replaced, a key component in whatever plans Alastor was developing.

The leverage wasn't perfect, certainly. Alastor could still walk away if Vox pushed too hard, could decide the technology wasn't worth dealing with an increasingly difficult contractor. But it existed, tangible and usable if he was smart about it.

For Alastor to actually want to do things for Vincent the way Margaret and Sterling and even Mrs. Kowalski apparently did for their own reasons, he needed that reason to be crystal clear. Needed to understand exactly what he stood to lose if Vincent disappeared or became unavailable or decided to take his knowledge elsewhere.

The technology was that reason. The portable transmitter, the revolutionary power supply, all the innovations Vincent was dangling just out of reach like bait on a line. As long as Alastor wanted those things badly enough, as long as the potential payoff outweighed the irritation of dealing with Vincent's personality, the leverage held.

He needed to finish this project as soon as possible and deliver something so revolutionary, so undeniably impressive, that Alastor would be forced to acknowledge Vincent's worth regardless of personal feelings or professional friction.

The energy that surged through him felt almost manic. He grabbed the blanket from his bed and wrapped it around his shoulders, cocooning himself in wool that was probably doing more harm than good for his temperature regulation but made him feel more comfortable somehow.

The phone was still sitting on the table next to his bed where he'd dragged it days ago in a fit of desperate optimism. He picked up the receiver, his fingers dialing David's number through muscle memory.

The phone rang four times before someone picked up. There was a pause, confusion evident even through the silence.

"Hello?" David's voice finally came through, cautious and uncertain in a way that suggested he didn't recognize the number.

"David, it's Vincent." Vox's voice came out rough, damaged from days of coughing and dehydration. He cleared his throat, trying to make it sound somewhat normal. "Sorry about the voice, I've been sick."

"Vincent!" The relief in David's tone was genuine. "Jesus Christ, I thought you were dead! I sent those final schematics through the mail days ago and you didn't call back. I was starting to worry I'd have to explain to someone's next of kin why their deceased relative had highly technical engineering documents scattered across their apartment signed by me."

The mail. Vox felt his heart rate spike. "You sent classified technical specifications through the regular postal service? David, anyone could have opened that! That's proprietary technology! That's the kind of thing that could screw us over if it fell into the wrong hands!"

"Relax, Vincent." David's laugh came through the line, dry and completely unfazed by the panic in Vox's voice. "If some random mailman can look at those equations and figure out how to build a high fidelity portable transmitter, then honestly, you should probably hire him instead of me. The math alone would take someone with serious graduate level education months to parse, and even then they'd need access to components that aren't commercially available. We're fine."

Vox paused, his prepared lecture dying in his throat. The logic was actually sound. The schematics were so technical, so full of professional jargon and advanced mathematics, that they might as well have been written in code. Someone without the proper educational background would look at them and see nothing but meaningless symbols and numbers, gibberish that held no practical value.

He laughed, surprising himself with just how genuine it sounded. It wasn't the calculated performance he usually delivered in social settings, but actual amusement at David's casual confidence, at the absurdity of worrying about industrial espionage via random postal workers who definitely weren't equipped to steal cutting edge broadcast technology.

"Fair enough," Vox conceded, letting himself lean back in his chair. The blanket slipped slightly from his shoulders and he adjusted it with his free hand. "Just don't let it happen again. Next time use a courier service or deliver them in person. I don't care if you think the risk is minimal, I'd rather not test those assumptions."

"Understood, boss. No more mail delivery of classified documents." David's tone suggested he was humoring Vox rather than actually agreeing with the concern, but that was fine. As long as the behavior changed, the underlying motivation didn't matter.

"The schematics are complete then? Everything's ready for fabrication?"

"Everything's done. I've triple checked the calculations, built partial prototypes of the critical subsystems, verified the thermal management actually works under load. It's ready. You just need to source the components and find someone competent enough to assemble it without blowing themselves up."

"I'll handle the sourcing. You've done excellent work, David. Better than I could have hoped for, honestly."

"Just doing my job. Though I have to say, Vincent, working on this has been the most interesting project I've touched in years. Whatever you're planning to do with this technology, I hope it's something that makes the industry take notice. This deserves recognition."

Vox smiled at that, the expression feeling strange on his face after so long. "Don't worry. People will definitely notice. This is going to change everything."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries, David confirming some final technical details that Vox barely processed, before ending the call with promises to touch base once the next phase began.

Vox set the receiver back in its cradle and sat there for a moment, letting the satisfaction wash over him. The technical side was down. David had delivered exactly what was promised, had created something revolutionary that would cement Vincent's value in Alastor's eyes. The leverage was unquestionable now. All that remained was making sure Alastor understood it.

The fever was still present, he could feel it simmering, making his head feel packed with cotton and his limbs heavy. But underneath that discomfort was something else now. The return of that cold focused clarity that had served him so well his whole life.

He felt in control again. Not completely, his body was still aching and his social relationships were still complicated messes of his own creation, but in control of the things that actually mattered.

The clock on his desk showed half past five. Early evening, the station would still be busy with preparation for the night broadcasts. Alastor would be there, in his office or in the broadcast booth, completely unaware that his wayward contractor had just locked down a piece of revolutionary technology that would transform their working relationship.

Vox stood, testing his legs. They held his weight without trembling, which was an improvement over this morning. The room stayed mostly stable, only a slight tilt that he could deal with if he moved slowly enough.

He needed to deliver the progress report to Barbara. Needed to file the documentation that would demonstrate he was back on schedule and back to being the competent professional Alastor had agreed to pay three hundred dollars a week for.

And if he *happened* to run into Alastor while doing so, well, that would just be fortunate timing.

Vox grabbed the project folder from his desk, the one containing the status report he'd prepared before getting sick. He'd just need to add whatever David sent him and it would be complete. His handwriting on the cover page was still neat despite having been written during the early stages of fever.

He shrugged on his coat, which smelled faintly damp but would have to do. Ran his hands through his hair one more time in a futile attempt to make it behave. Checked his reflection in the fish tank glass and decided he looked acceptable.

The fish tank bubbled in the corner, both guppies still alive and swimming their usual patterns. The larger one had backed off from its relentless harassment of the smaller one, though whether that was genuine cessation of hostilities or just temporary strategic retreat was impossible to determine.

The walk to the station felt different than it had in days. The cold air was still biting, the winter evening already dark despite the early hour, but Vox's steps were purposeful. It was no longer the stumbling shuffle of someone barely maintaining consciousness, but the deliberate stride of someone who knew exactly where they were going and why.

He expected to feel anxious as he approached the building. Expected the familiar electric itch of wanting to scan every shadow for Alastor's presence, to track his movements through the building like a hunter stalking prey.

But as he pushed through the station's front doors into the warm lobby, he realized he didn't care.

If Alastor was here, fine. If he wasn't, equally fine. Vox had a job to do, documentation to file, professional obligations to fulfill. His presence at the station had nothing to do with Alastor's schedule or location or availability for spontaneous encounters.

The realization felt like victory. Proof that he wasn't obsessed, that Alastor had been completely wrong in his assessment. Vox was here for business reasons, for project management purposes, for the simple professional necessity of keeping his client informed about progress and timeline.

If Alastor happened to interpret his illness and absence as some kind of dramatic statement or emotional crisis, that was Alastor's problem. Vox had definitely been sick and he had prioritized his health over non essential business meetings. Had made the rational decision to recover properly rather than dragging himself to the station while contagious and useless.

The logic was airtight and the reasoning was sound. And the fact that Vox felt immense satisfaction instead of guilt when imagining Alastor's reaction to being stood up on Monday just proved he had a healthy sense of self worth and professional boundaries.

The elevator carried him up to the second floor with its usual grinding reluctance. The hallway was busy with people moving between offices, the evening shift ramping up toward broadcast time. Vox navigated through the traffic with practiced ease, his folder clutched against his chest.

Barbara's desk was positioned just outside Alastor's office, a strategic location that gave her oversight of everyone who approached while maintaining professional distance from the actual workspace. She looked up as Vox approached, her expression shifting from neutral concentration to mild surprise.

“Oh. You’re back. I wasn’t expecting to see you until next week at the earliest.”

Vox set the folder down on her desk with a satisfying thud. “Here are the files. Latest progress report and some updates. Everything’s on schedule despite the illness.”

He kept his voice professional. He didn’t mention Alastor’s name, didn’t reference their phone conversation or give any indication that this was anything other than routine project documentation.

Barbara picked up the folder, registering its weight as she shifted it in her hands. Her eyebrows rose slightly. “This feels… thorough.”

Vox nodded, a quiet hint of satisfaction in the gesture. “The client should be pleased.”

“The client,” Barbara echoed, glancing up at him, then toward the closed office door. “You mean Alastor?”

Vox inclined his head a fraction.

"I'm sure he will be." Barbara glanced toward the closed office door behind her. "He's been asking about you actually. Well, not asking exactly, but he mentioned you several times. Wanted updates on whether you'd checked in, whether the project was still on track."

Vox felt something electric spike through his chest. Not the desperate hunger from before, but something sharper. The satisfaction of a fisherman feeling the line twitch.

“…Well,” Vox said at last, not being able to mask the tone of smug satisfaction, “I wouldn’t want to keep him waiting any longer.”

He turned toward Alastor’s office, his hand already reaching for the handle.

“Wait.”

Barbara’s voice stopped him. She frowned, glancing once more at the closed door before looking back at him. “I’m not sure this is the best moment. He’s in a meeting.”

Vox paused, fingers still hovering near the handle. “A meeting,” he echoed mildly. “With whom?”

“Mrs. Pendergast,” Barbara said. “She arrived a few minutes ago. I really think you should wait until they’re finished.”

Vox considered that for half a second, the corner of his mouth still curled upward. “Mrs. Pendergast,” he repeated, as if testing the name. Then added lightly, “I’m sure she won’t mind if I steal him for a moment.”

Barbara’s expression tightened. “I really think you should...”

Vox waved the concern away with an easy, dismissive flick of his hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll be quick.”

He reached for the handle again only to pause as a sound from inside the office carried through the door.

The voice was melodic and sophisticated, the kind of cadence that Vox associated with wealth and education in equal measure. She was saying something about autumn programming schedules, her tone carrying a charming note of confidence.

Vox stood with his hand on the door handle, his brain running quick calculations. The polite thing would be to do what Barbara suggested and wait. To let Alastor finish his meeting without interruption. To respect the social convention that closed doors meant privacy, that other people's time was valuable, that barging into ongoing conversations was rude. This was obviously an important discussion with someone who had significantly more social capital than Vincent Whittman, weatherman, could ever hope to possess.

He could let Barbara announce him properly, to give Alastor the opportunity to either invite him in or schedule a more appropriate meeting time, to maintain the professional boundaries that kept their working relationship from becoming messier than it already was.

Vox tightened his grip on the brass handle.

He could feel the fever climbing again, making his head feel light and strange, making his inhibitions slip away like sand through fingers. The rational part of his brain was screaming warnings about consequences and professional behavior and not burning bridges he might need later.

But today, after days of lying alone in his apartment feeling pathetic and powerless and forgotten, after being called obsessive and erratic and told his priorities were questionable, after finally clawing his way back to some sense of control and leverage, Vox didn't give a damn about what he should do.

He shoved the door open.

Chapter 40

The door swung open with more force than Vox had intended, the brass handle hitting the interior wall with a sharp crack that echoed through Alastor's office like a gunshot.

The conversation inside stopped mid sentence.

Alastor sat behind his desk in his usual position, one hand resting on a stack of papers, the other holding a fountain pen that was frozen mid air. His expression shifted from mild concentration to something harder to read, his smile tightening at the edges.

Across from him sat a woman Vox had never seen before. She was perhaps fifty, elegantly dressed in a deep burgundy dress. Her hair was styled in perfect waves, her makeup immaculate. Vox could tell she greatly valued personal presentation. Pearl earrings caught the lamplight as she turned to look at the intrusion, her posture stiffening with immediate disapproval.

"Mr. Whittman." Alastor's voice carried that particular flatness that meant he was containing irritation through sheer force of will. "You are interrupting."

Vox stepped fully into the office, letting the door swing shut behind him with another decisive thud. His fever made everything feel slightly unreal, the edges of his vision soft and blurred, but his mind was sharp enough to register the social dynamics at play. Alastor was performing his public persona. The woman was clearly someone important, someone worth impressing or at least not offending. And Vox had just crashed interrupted whatever was going on.

It was perfect.

"Mrs. Pendergast, I presume?" Vox ignored Alastor completely, turning his attention to the woman, his voice taking on the smooth professional tone he'd perfected over the decades. "I

apologize for the dramatic entrance. The door handle has been sticking lately and I may have overcompensated on the force required."

Mrs. Pendergast's expression softened fractionally, though wariness remained in her eyes.

"Indeed," she said carefully. "And you are?"

"Vincent Whittman. I work with Alastor on several projects." Vox moved further into the room, his steps measured and deliberate, trying to ignore the way the floor kept trying to tilt under his feet. "Though I suspect my timing leaves something to be desired. Were you discussing the autumn programming schedule? I heard mention of it from the hallway and assumed the meeting was wrapping up."

Alastor's eyes tracked Vox's movement across the room with the intensity of a predator watching something that had just entered its territory uninvited. His smile remained fixed but something in his posture had shifted, tension creeping into his shoulders that hadn't been there moments before.

"The meeting was not, in fact, wrapping up," Alastor said, his tone still pleasant but carrying an edge underneath that suggested he was calculating exactly how to remove Vox from his office without causing a scene. "Perhaps you could wait outside with Barbara until we've concluded our business here?"

"Oh, I don't mind waiting." Vox gestured toward the couch positioned against the wall. "I'll just sit quietly over here. Won't interrupt at all. Please, continue your discussion as if I'm not even present."

He settled onto the couch without waiting for permission, sinking into expensive leather. The positioning was perfect. He could see Alastor's face directly, could watch every microexpression and subtle shift in body language, while Mrs. Pendergast had her back to him, forced to either turn around constantly or ignore his presence entirely.

Mrs. Pendergast looked at Alastor with an expression that clearly communicated her discomfort with this arrangement. Alastor's smile had turned into one that Vox recognized

from hell, the particular strain that came from maintaining pleasant facades while internally cataloging increasingly creative forms of violence.

"As I was saying," Alastor continued, his attention returning to Mrs. Pendergast, "the autumn schedule does present certain opportunities for expanding our cultural programming. Your suggestion about featuring local musicians has considerable merit."

"Yes, exactly." Mrs. Pendergast seemed to be trying to recapture the thread of their conversation, though her shoulders remained stiff, her awareness of Vox's presence behind her evident in the way she kept glancing toward Alastor's face for reassurance. "I've been working with the symphony board to identify emerging talents who might benefit from radio exposure. The exposure could be mutually beneficial, really. Fresh content for your programming and valuable publicity for artists who are still establishing their careers."

Vox let his eyes wander around the office while they talked, taking in details he'd noticed before but appreciating with fresh interest now that he was actually sitting down, feeling comfortable for the first time in this room instead of constantly performing for Alastor. The record collection dominated one wall, albums organized with obsessive precision that suggested Alastor spent considerable time maintaining it. The desk was immaculate despite the scattered papers, everything positioned just so.

A small side table sat next to the couch, holding several items that Vox had never paid attention to before. A brass letter opener with an ornate handle, a small wooden box with mother of pearl inlay, probably containing something mundane like spare pens or business cards, a crystal paperweight that caught the lamplight and threw rainbow refractions across the wall.

Vox picked up the letter opener, testing its weight in his hand. The brass was cool and heavy, well made rather than decorative trash. He turned it over, examining the craftsmanship while Mrs. Pendergast's voice continued discussing something about venue acoustics and recording quality.

"The challenge, of course, is capturing the full range of orchestral sound through radio transmission," she was saying, her tone carrying the enthusiasm of someone discussing a subject they genuinely cared about. "The technology is improving but there are still limitations in how much nuance can be preserved when compressed into broadcast format."

Vox set down the letter opener and reached for the small box. He had more than a few ideas on how to help with the issue she was presenting, but didn't feel any need to speak up. He flipped open the lid. Inside were pieces of wood, petrified and old from the look of them, with some kind of engraved pattern he couldn't quite make out in the dim light. He picked up one, holding it closer to examine the detail work.

Behind him, Mrs. Pendergast's voice had faltered slightly. He could feel her attention splitting between Alastor and whatever Vox was doing on the couch, her discomfort mounting, her sentences becoming shorter.

Alastor's voice remained smooth and professional, guiding the conversation back on track with practiced ease. "The technical limitations are certainly a consideration. Perhaps we could arrange a test broadcast, evaluate the quality before committing to a full series?"

"That would be excellent." Mrs. Pendergast's relief at having something concrete to agree on was audible. "I could coordinate with the symphony to identify a suitable program for the trial run."

Vox closed the box and stood up, the fever making his head swim slightly as he rose too quickly. The room tilted and he had to grip the couch arm for a moment before his balance stabilized. Once steady, he moved toward the bookshelves, his fingers trailing along the spines of volumes that ranged from technical broadcasting manuals to what looked like first editions of obscure works of literature.

He pulled out a slim volume at random, flipping it open to read the inscription on the first page. The handwriting was elegant and old fashioned, someone's name and a date from the previous decade. A gift, probably, from someone who'd thought Alastor would appreciate rare books. The assumption had apparently been correct given how carefully the collection was maintained.

Mrs. Pendergast had stopped talking entirely now. Vox could feel her eyes on him as he examined the book, her attention completely diverted from whatever she'd been saying about coordination and scheduling. The silence stretched long enough to become awkward, demanding acknowledgment.

Alastor cleared his throat. "Vincent, perhaps you could find something to occupy your attention that doesn't involve handling my personal belongings?"

"Hmm?" Vox looked up from the book, his expression the picture of innocent confusion. "Oh, sorry. Just admiring your collection. You have excellent taste in literature. This book must have cost a fortune."

Mrs. Pendergast shifted in her chair, the movement small but significant. She was getting ready to leave, Vox realized. The conversation had been thoroughly derailed by his presence and she was looking for a polite exit rather than trying to force it back on track.

"Alastor, darling," she said, her tone apologetic but firm. "I think perhaps we should continue this discussion another time. When you're less occupied with other matters. I can call Barbara next week to schedule something more convenient?"

"If you prefer." Alastor's voice remained pleasant but Vox caught the flash of something sharper in his eyes before the professional mask reasserted itself. "Though I do apologize for the interruption."

"No need to apologize." Mrs. Pendergast was already gathering her things, collecting her purse and gloves. "I understand how busy you are. The radio business never stops, does it?"

She stood, smoothing her skirt. Alastor rose as well, coming around the desk to escort her to the door with the kind of old fashioned courtesy that probably made her generation feel respected and valued.

"It was lovely speaking with you as always, Eleanor." Alastor held the door open, his posture perfect, his smile warm and genuine looking. "I'll have Barbara coordinate with you about the test broadcast. I think this could be an excellent addition to our seasonal programming."

"I look forward to it." Mrs. Pendergast paused at the threshold, glancing back at Vox who was still standing by the bookshelves holding the book. "It was interesting to meet you, Mr. Whittman. I hope you feel better soon. You look rather unwell."

"Thank you for your concern." Vox set the book back on the shelf carefully. "It's just a minor fever. Nothing serious. Lovely to meet you as well."

She left with one final polite nod, her heels clicking on the hallway floor as she made her escape from what had clearly become an uncomfortable situation. The sound faded gradually, replaced by the general ambient noise of the station going about its evening business.

Alastor remained at the door for a moment, his back to Vox, his hand still resting on the doorknob. Then he closed it slowly, the click of the latch engaging somehow more ominous than if he'd slammed it.

When he turned to face Vox, his expression had shifted. The public performance was gone, replaced by something colder. More focused. The smile remained but had transformed into something that carried no warmth whatsoever.

"That was remarkably rude," Alastor said, his voice calm. "Barging into an ongoing meeting, handling my belongings without permission, creating enough disruption that my guest felt compelled to leave early. Would you care to explain what possessed you to behave like that?"

Vox blinked, the picture of innocent confusion. His fever made the performance easier, lending genuine disorientation to his expression. "Rude? How was I rude? I was perfectly polite to her! Greeted her properly, apologized for the dramatic entrance, even complimented your book collection. I thought I was being quite civil actually."

Something flickered in Alastor's eyes that might have been amusement if it hadn't been buried under layers of irritation. "You interrupted a private meeting and then proceeded to make yourself at home in my office while completely ignoring my explicit request that you wait outside. That is the textbook definition of rude behavior, Vincent."

"Oh." Vox let his expression shift to dawning realization, playing up the confusion. "Oh! Was she your lady friend? That makes so much more sense now. I thought this was a business meeting but if it was actually a romantic rendezvous then yes, I can see how my presence would have been inappropriate. My apologies, I genuinely didn't realize you two were involved like that."

The suggestion was deliberate and calculated to provoke exactly the reaction it got. Alastor's jaw tightened fractionally, his composure developing hairline cracks.

"That is a remarkably inappropriate speculation on multiple levels." Alastor's voice had dropped into a register that suggested he was working very hard to maintain patience. "Mrs. Pendergast is a married woman with two children and is on the board of the city's symphony orchestra. She was here to discuss potential collaboration opportunities for our autumn programming schedule. Nothing remotely romantic was occurring."

"Right, of course." Vox nodded seriously, as if this explanation made perfect sense and he totally believed it. "I understand completely."

The tone made it clear he didn't actually believe it, that he was still entertaining the possibility of romance despite Alastor's denial. It was petty manipulation, the kind of needling that served no strategic purpose except making Alastor uncomfortable. But Vox was running on fever and spite and the electric satisfaction of having successfully derailed a conversation, so strategic purpose felt optional right now.

Alastor stared at him for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then something shifted, the irritation fading into something that looked almost curious. He walked back to his desk and settled into his chair with fluid grace, his posture relaxing slightly as he apparently decided that anger was less productive than simply engaging with Vincent .

"Eleanor Pendergast has been involved with the symphony board for fifteen years," Alastor said, his tone shifting into something more conversational. "She's responsible for most of their fundraising initiatives and has excellent connections throughout the city's cultural institutions. We've been discussing ways to feature local musicians on my program, giving them exposure while providing my audience with higher quality content than the usual commercial recordings."

Vox moved away from the bookshelves and settled back onto the couch, his attention actually focusing on what Alastor was saying now that the game of provocation had run its course. "That's smart positioning. Cultural programming plays well with advertisers who want to associate their products with sophistication and refinement. Plus it gives you content that

your competitors can't easily replicate since they'd need similar connections to the symphony board."

"Indeed." Alastor's expression had shifted again, the irritation fading further as genuine interest in the subject matter took over. "The technical challenge is capturing orchestral depth through radio transmission without losing too much nuance."

"Have you considered using multiple microphones positioned at different distances?" Vox leaned forward slightly, his mind engaging with the technical problem despite the fever. "You could mix the signals to balance direct sound with ambient room tone. It would require more sophisticated equipment than standard broadcast setups but the results would be significantly better."

Alastor's eyebrows rose fractionally. "That's actually an excellent suggestion. I hadn't considered a multi microphone approach. The mixing would be complex but achievable with proper coordination."

They talked for several minutes about microphone configurations and signal processing, the conversation flowing with surprising ease now that they'd moved past the social friction into territory where both of them had genuine expertise. Vox found himself actually enjoying the discussion, the back and forth of technical problem solving scratching an itch he hadn't realized needed scratching.

The conversation was interrupted by a soft knock at the door. Alastor called permission to enter and a young man Vox vaguely recognized from the station staff pushed into the office carrying a tray with tea service. The junior staffer looked surprised to see Mrs. Pendergast's chair empty, his eyes darting between Alastor and Vox with confusion.

"Oh, was I too slow?" The young man's voice carried genuine distress. "I tried to be quick but the kettle was taking forever to boil."

"It's fine." Alastor's tone was reassuring, slipping back into his theatrical cadence effortlessly. "Mrs. Pendergast had to leave early for another meeting. But I would still appreciate the tea if you don't mind."

The young man set the tray down on Alastor's desk carefully, then selected one of the two teacups and handed it to Alastor with a small nod of acknowledgment. The ritual was clearly familiar, something they'd done many times before.

"Can I have one too?" Vox asked casually from the couch.

The young man looked at Alastor with an expression that clearly communicated confusion about who this person was and whether he was authorized to receive tea meant for important guests. Alastor paused for just a moment, his eyes meeting Vox's across the room, before giving a slight nod of permission.

The young man handed Vox the second cup, the one that had presumably been intended for Mrs. Pendergast before she'd been driven away by Vox's presence. The irony wasn't lost on him as he accepted the delicate porcelain, the cup hot enough to warm his hands.

"Thank you," Vox said to the young man, who nodded and retreated from the office with the now empty tray. The door clicked shut behind him, leaving them alone again.

Vox blew across the surface of the tea, watching the steam curl and dissipate in the lamplight. "Hot tea feels really good right now," he remarked, taking a careful sip. The liquid was hot and slightly bitter, some kind of black tea with undertones he couldn't quite identify through his compromised sense of taste. "You know, because I'm sick. Not that you'd care particularly, but tea does help with congestion."

Alastor didn't look up from where he'd been making notes on his papers. "I think I already cared more than enough."

Vox paused, the cup halfway to his mouth for a second sip. His brain, still sluggish from fever, took a moment to process what had just been said. "Wait, what?"

"The phone call," Alastor said, his tone carrying dryness that suggested he was pointing out something that should have been obvious. "I verified you were alive, offered to cover medical expenses if necessary. I think that's more than most people do for business partners."

The words landed strange, somewhere between dismissive and genuine. Vox stared at him, trying to parse whether this was deflection or actual acknowledgment, whether Alastor was minimizing the phone call or simply reframing it in terms he was comfortable admitting to.

As he was trying to formulate a response, he realized that the fever had spiked again. He could feel it climbing, the heat spreading through his chest and crawling up his neck into his face. His head felt light suddenly, packed with cotton, his thoughts scattering. The room tilted slightly and he had to grip the teacup harder to keep it steady in his hands.

But the fever also brought clarity of a different kind. The kind that burned away social inhibition and left only raw impulse. He set down the tea with careful precision, not trusting his grip anymore, and leaned forward on the couch.

"The first stage of the tech is done," Vox said, his voice coming out slightly too loud, too energized. "David finished everything. The power supply is complete, fully tested, ready for production. And the other two stages are going to be even faster now that we have the foundation. It's going to be a breeze, Alastor. Smooth sailing from here on out."

He watched Alastor carefully through the feverish haze, tracking every tiny expression with the focused intensity that came from decades of reading people for advantage. Alastor had been bringing his own teacup toward his mouth, but he paused. The cup stopped halfway to his lips, steam still rising from the dark liquid inside.

And there, just for a moment, Vox caught it. A flash of something in those dark eyes. Not the theatrical warmth or the cold calculation. Something sharper. It was genuine interest bleeding through the carefully maintained facade.

Alastor was excited.

The realization hit Vox unexpectedly hard. This mattered to Alastor. Not just as business investment or useful tool, but as something that genuinely captured his interest. Something he wanted badly enough that his control slipped for just a fraction of a second.

Vox couldn't help himself. The fever had burned away his better judgment. He leaned even further forward, his elbows resting on his knees, his face splitting into a grin that was probably too wide, too manic.

"You're excited," he said, drawing out the word with teasing emphasis. "You're actually excited about this, aren't you? I can see it on your face."

Alastor blinked, the moment of exposed interest vanishing so quickly it might have been imagined if Vox hadn't been watching so carefully. He set his teacup down on the desk without taking the sip he'd been about to take, his expression settling back into polite neutrality.

"I'm pleased the project is progressing on schedule," Alastor said carefully, his tone measured. "It's always gratifying when contractors deliver results as promised."

The deflection was transparent but Vox didn't call him on it.

"You know, I'm excited too," Vox said, the words tumbling out without thinking. "About the technology."

Alastor's expression flickered with something that might have been surprise or might have been wariness, difficult to tell which. "That's... good."

"It'll change everything," Vox continued, his brain accelerating past social boundaries into territory that was probably unwise but felt necessary in the moment. "The way people think about portable transmission, the assumptions about what's possible with current technology. We're going to make people question everything they thought they knew."

Alastor let out a noncommittal hum and returned his attention to the papers on his desk, his body language shifting to communicate that this particular conversational thread was concluded and they should move on to other matters.

But Vox saw the way his fingers tightened slightly on the fountain pen. Saw the subtle tension in his shoulders that suggested the words had landed with more impact than Alastor was willing to acknowledge. The excitement was still there, just buried under professional distance.

Vox leaned back on the couch, satisfied. The fever was climbing higher now, making his head feel disconnected from his body, making the room's edges soft and dreamlike. But underneath the physical discomfort was something warm and electric. The satisfaction of seeing genuine reaction beneath Alastor's masks.

He watched Alastor work for a moment, making notes, occasionally glancing at documents spread across his desk. The teacup sat beside him, steam still rising from the dark surface, slowly cooling in the quiet office.

Alastor hadn't taken a single sip.

Chapter 41

The sleep was heavy and dreamless at first. His body had simply shut off, the fever and exhaustion finally overwhelming whatever manic energy had been keeping him upright and functional.

Then the dreams began.

He was small again. Young enough that the world felt larger than it actually was, rooms stretching into vast spaces, furniture towering overhead. The details were fuzzy around the edges.

But he knew where he was. Recognized with the bone deep certainty that this was his childhood bedroom, though the layout made no sense when he tried to focus on it, doors appearing in wrong places, windows that shouldn't exist, the physics bending to accommodate dream logic.

He was lying in bed. Could feel the mattress beneath him, too soft and too firm simultaneously. Warmth spread over him suddenly. Something being pulled up across his shoulders, tucked gently.

His mother's hand touched his forehead, cool and steady against his feverish skin, brushing back hair that was damp with sweat. The contact was soothing in ways he couldn't articulate, something fundamentally safe about someone taking care of him when he was too helpless to take care of himself.

He let out a small sound, something between a sigh and a murmur, leaning into the phantom touch without thinking.

His eyes snapped open.

The transition was jarring, violent in its abruptness. One moment he was being tucked in and the next he was staring at a dark ceiling, his brain struggling to reconcile where he was.

Vox frowned, his thoughts sluggish and confused. He didn't remember falling asleep or getting into bed at all. He rolled onto his side, pulling the blanket up to his face, the fabric soft against his cheek. His eyes closed again, seeking the return of that warmth, that feeling of being cared for that the dream had provided.

His eyes snapped open again.

The smell was wrong.

His vision adjusted slowly to the darkness, shapes resolving into recognizable objects as his pupils dilated. The couch he was lying on, the desk across the room with its neat stacks of papers, the bookshelves lining the walls, their spines barely visible in the dim light.

Vox sat up so fast his head spun, the sudden movement sending the room tilting sideways. His hands gripped the couch edge as he looked around with the rapid darting attention of prey checking for predators, his heart suddenly hammering against his ribs with force that made breathing difficult.

What the hell was wrong with him? He'd fallen asleep in a serial killer's office. Had made himself vulnerable and unconscious in the private space of someone who murdered people for entertainment. Had trusted, on some level that bypassed rational thought entirely, that he'd be safe here despite knowing exactly what Alastor was capable of when the mood struck him.

The realization sent ice through his veins.

His eyes scanned the room more carefully now, searching for Alastor, but the office was empty, the desk chair vacant, no figure lurking in shadowy corners waiting to see how long it would take Vincent to notice he was being watched.

The lights were off. Or mostly off, he realized. Just the desk lamp left on, its warm glow providing enough illumination to navigate without being bright enough to disturb someone sleeping.

Had Alastor just left? Gone home and abandoned Vox here? That seemed wildly irresponsible from a security standpoint, leaving someone like him unsupervised in a private office overnight. Unless he'd tried to wake Vox and failed, in which case the fever had been deeper than Vincent realized and that was its own kind of concerning.

The knitted shawl that doubled as a blanket for the time being slid off his shoulders as he shifted position. Vox looked down at it, his brain processing information with frustrating slowness. He definitely hadn't been carrying it when he'd arrived at the office. Which meant someone had covered him while he was sleeping.

The dream surfaced again in his memory. The feeling of being tucked in, of cool hands brushing hair back from his forehead. The warmth and safety and care.

That wasn't a real memory from his childhood. Couldn't be. He didn't have memories like that, warm and gentle and protective. There had been nothing wrong with his upbringing, exactly. Childhood, to him, was simply something that had happened, not something he missed.

He was just making things up again. Fever dreams creating false nostalgia for comfort he'd never actually received. Or maybe it was a real memory from when he was too young to actually remember, some fragment from his subconscious.

Vox shrugged mentally, deciding not to dwell on it. The origins of the dream didn't particularly matter. It had felt nice in the moment and now it was over and he had more pressing concerns to address.

He looked at the clock on Alastor's desk, squinting to make out the numbers in the dim light. Eleven twenty. Much earlier than he'd expected. He'd assumed it was the dead hours of early morning when normal people were sleeping and the city was quiet. But eleven meant the evening broadcast was probably still running, meant Alastor was likely in the booth rather than having abandoned the building entirely.

Which meant Alastor had just let him sleep. Had left him here undisturbed, had covered him with a blanket, had turned off most of the lights to avoid waking him.

That seemed wildly out of character. It was too considerate and too nice in ways that didn't align with the person Vox had known for decades. Alastor was courteous when it served his purposes, pleasant when performing for audiences, but genuinely caring about Vincent's comfort? That didn't track with any of the established patterns.

Vox stood slowly, testing his legs. They held his weight without trembling, which was an improvement over earlier. The fever was still present, he could feel it simmering in his blood, but the intensity had decreased. His head felt clearer, thoughts connecting with something approximating normal speed rather than the manic confusion that had dominated most of the evening.

He walked to the door and cracked it open, peering into the hallway. Empty. Barbara's desk was dark and vacant, her typewriter covered, her chair pushed in neatly. The hallway lights were dimmed to their overnight setting, just enough illumination to prevent accidents without wasting electricity on spaces nobody was using.

Vox closed the door again and turned back to survey the office. The space looked different in the semi darkness, more intimate somehow. Less like a professional workspace and more like someone's private sanctuary.

His feet carried him toward Alastor's desk without conscious decision. He walked behind it, the movement feeling transgressive in ways he couldn't quite articulate. This was Alastor's space, his territory, his seat of power within this building. Standing here felt like trespassing, like violating boundaries that existed even when their owner wasn't present to enforce them.

His glasses lay on the table, set neatly off to one side. Vox frowned as he put them on. He couldn’t remember leaving them there. He decided not to linger on the question of how they’d ended up in Alastor’s possession in the first place, or what it meant that Alastor had taken them off him. The thought made something in his stomach tighten uncomfortably in a way he didn’t care to examine any closer.

Vox sat down in the chair.

The leather was still slightly warm, or maybe that was just his imagination. The desk surface was immaculate from this angle, every paper positioned with deliberate care, the fountain pen resting at precisely the right angle. He could see Alastor's handwriting on the top document, elegant script that managed to be both readable and artistic simultaneously.

He felt like he was committing a crime. Not legally, obviously. Sitting in someone's chair wasn't actually illegal. But morally, spiritually, in whatever framework governed appropriate office behavior, this was definitely wrong.

What was wrong with him? Since when did Vox of all people care about the sanctity of workplace hierarchy? Since when did sitting in a chair feel like a violation worth feeling guilty about?

He opened the top drawer, half expecting alarms to sound or booby traps to deploy. Nothing happened. Inside were standard office supplies organized with obsessive precision. Everything in its place, everything reflecting the same meticulous control that Alastor applied to every aspect of his public presentation.

Vox opened another drawer. More supplies. A leather bound appointment book with entries in that same elegant handwriting. Some loose photographs that he didn't examine too closely, aware that he was already pushing boundaries and Alastor would definitely be able to tell someone went through his things if he started to rummage. He knew that if he so much as touched them, he'd never be able to put them back the way they were.

His brain supplied helpful commentary while his hands kept searching. Maybe if he found evidence of the murders, concrete proof that Alastor was actually the killer Vincent suspected him to be, he wouldn't have to continue this charade. Wouldn't have to build the radio project or maintain this increasingly complicated professional relationship. Could focus on his own innovations, on advancing technology in his field rather than wasting expertise on revolutionary transmitters for someone else's benefit.

But he found nothing. Just office supplies and appointment books and the mundane detritus of someone's professional life. No bloodstained weapons hidden in false bottoms. No

newspaper clippings of mysterious disappearances. No incriminating journals detailing murder fantasies in elaborate prose.

One of the lower drawers was locked. Vox's hand hovered over it, temptation warring with self preservation. He could probably pick the lock if he wanted to. Had the knowledge and the improvisational skills to turn a paper clip into a functional lockpick. But that felt too risky.

He had to be smart about this. His ears stayed alert, tracking sounds from the hallway, waiting for any indication that someone was approaching. He'd hear the elevator before Alastor returned, would have plenty of warning to get back to the couch and resume his sleeping position.

The teacup sat on the corner of the desk, its contents long since cooled to room temperature. Vox picked it up, examining the delicate porcelain before bringing it to his lips. The tea was bitter and slightly unpleasant cold, but he took a sip anyway, maintaining eye contact with his reflection in the dark window across the room.

He leaned back in the chair, affecting Alastor's posture. Relaxed but controlled, the position of someone comfortable with authority and accustomed to being listened to.

This was the life. This was what he should have. Sitting in his office, in his chair, overlooking operations and making decisions that rippled through entire industries. He used to have just that though, didn't he?

He tried very hard not to think about Hell. About what he'd had and what he'd lost and the vast gulf between his former power and current circumstances. Dwelling on it served no purpose except driving himself slowly insane with frustration and impotent rage. Better to focus on the present, on rebuilding influence in this timeline through whatever means available.

But sometimes the thoughts surfaced anyway. Sometimes he couldn't help comparing this cramped office with its single occupant to the sprawling headquarters he'd commanded, the hundreds of employees who'd jumped when he gave orders, the technology that had responded to his will like extensions of his own nervous system.

The elevator mechanism engaged somewhere down the hall, motors humming to life. The sound cut through Vox's nostalgia with the efficiency of a bucket of cold water.

He moved faster than he probably should have given his fever, standing and circling back around the desk with steps that were hopefully quiet enough not to be heard from the hallway. The chair was pushed back into its original position carefully, every detail restored to how it had been before he'd started snooping.

Vox returned to the couch and arranged himself in approximately the same sleeping position he'd woken from, pulling the blanket back over his shoulders. His eyes closed, his breathing slowed to the deeper rhythm of sleep, his body going deliberately limp in a way that hopefully looked natural rather than performative.

He didn't know why he was doing this. Didn't understand the impulse to pretend he was asleep rather than just being awake when Alastor returned. Something about maintaining the fiction felt important, though he couldn't articulate why even to himself.

The elevator doors opened. Footsteps approached down the hallway, confident and unhurried. The office door opened with its usual soft click.

Vox kept his breathing steady, his eyes closed, his body perfectly still. He could feel attention on him, could sense Alastor's presence in the doorway through some sixth sense that had nothing to do with actual perception and everything to do with the particular awareness that came from being watched by someone dangerous.

The pause stretched long enough that Vox started to wonder if he'd miscalculated. If Alastor could tell he was faking, if the performance was too obvious, if he was about to be called out for this strange deception.

Then light exploded across his eyelids with painful intensity.

"Okay Whittman, out." Alastor's voice carried across the room with deliberate loudness, theatrical projection designed to wake the dead. "I have to go home. Time for you to leave."

Vox hissed, his face contorting before he could stop the reaction. The lights were aggressive, all of them turned on simultaneously, transforming the office from dim sanctuary into something that felt like being inside a fluorescent bulb. His fever amplified the discomfort, made the brightness feel physical, like someone was shoving needles directly into his optical nerves.

Fucking hell, he thought with genuine irritation. *Why does he get satisfaction from being cruel in such meaningless ways?* What possible enjoyment came from deliberately making someone's sensory experience worse just because you could?

He sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes in the universal gesture of someone roused from deep sleep. "Sorry. I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep. Must have been more exhausted than I thought."

Which was actually true, he realized. He hadn't intended to pass out on Alastor's couch. His body had simply given up without consulting his brain about whether that was a good choice.

"Yes, I know." Alastor was packing up his items, not looking up. "You need to leave though. I can't leave you here. Security risk."

Vox straightened where he sat, the blanket sliding off his shoulders. "You think I'm going to steal something?"

Alastor's eyes cut sideways toward him, the look carrying layers of meaning. "I do not own this station. I just follow the rules about unsupervised access to private offices after hours."

The words landed strange. Vox felt himself genuinely struck by the statement, his thoughts stuttering over two separate realizations.

First, he sometimes forgot that Alastor didn't actually own the radio station. Didn't have the same level of control and authority that Vox had possessed in Hell over his media empire. Alastor was an employee, albeit a highly valued one, but still ultimately subject to someone else's rules and oversight.

Second, following the rules seemed wildly inconsistent with someone who murdered people for entertainment. The contrast between meticulous adherence to workplace policies and complete disregard for laws against homicide was so absurd it almost made Vox laugh.

"Are you going home too?" The question came out before Vox could filter it, genuine curiosity overriding strategic calculation.

Alastor didn't reply verbally. Just made a soft humming sound that communicated obvious affirmation. Where else would he be going at eleven thirty on a weeknight?

"Do you live nearby?" Vox asked, his brain not quite catching up to his mouth.

"Why?" Alastor's tone carried amusement mixed with suspicion. "Are you planning to visit me?"

"Sure," The enthusiasm was genuine. "I could."

The silence that followed was heavy with implications. Alastor stared at him with an expression that suggested he was trying to determine if Vincent was joking or genuinely that socially unaware.

"That wasn't an invitation," Alastor said finally, his voice flat.

"You could visit *me* then." Vox heard the words emerging and couldn't quite believe he was saying them. "I mean, if you wanted. I'm not far from here."

"I'll think about it." The tone made it clear he wouldn't be thinking about it at all, that this was polite deflection rather than genuine consideration.

Awkward silence filled the office. Alastor had already donned his coat, prepared to leave, clearly waiting for Vox to also prepare for departure. Vox was still wrapped in the blanket, making no moves toward actually getting ready to go anywhere.

"So," Alastor said with strained patience. "Are you getting up?"

"Oh sure, sorry." Vox tried to stand but the room tilted violently. He fell back where he sat just moments before, his vision swimming with black spots.

Alastor's smile tightened into something that looked almost painful, his jaw clenched with the effort of maintaining composure in the face of Vincent's continued ineptitude.

Vox managed to stand through sheer determination. He walked toward the door, each step requiring conscious attention to avoid stumbling. "Okay. Lead the way."

"You should leave first," Alastor said, not moving from his position near the door. "I need to lock up here."

"No, it's okay. I'll wait. It would be rude to just leave when you've been so accommodating." Vox leaned against the doorframe, trying to project casualness despite the way his legs were threatening to give out.

"It's quite alright." Alastor's tone had developed an edge. "I can manage locking a door without an audience."

Something pinged in Vox's awareness. The insistence felt wrong, too forceful for a simple matter of office security. Alastor didn't want Vox to see him leave, or see where he went, or witness whatever came next in his evening routine.

Suspicion bloomed cold and sharp in Vox's chest. Was he going to kill someone? Was this one of those nights where Alastor indulged his darker hobbies after finishing his respectable radio host duties?

"Are you going straight home?" The question came out more pointed than Vox intended, genuine concern bleeding through.

Alastor shot him a sideways glance again, his expression shifting into something harder to read. "Mr. Whittman, why are you so curious about where I'm going and when? This is beginning to feel less like small talk and more like interrogation."

"I don't know." Vox forced his tone lighter, more casual. "Just making conversation. Being sociable. Isn't that what coworkers do?"

"Coworkers typically don't grill each other about their evening plans with quite this much intensity." Alastor opened the door wider, the gesture clearly communicating that this conversation was over and Vox needed to leave immediately. "Go home, Vincent. Get some rest. We can discuss project updates when you're not actively delirious."

Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, “Oh and leave Barbara’s shawl in the box near her desk, if you would.”

Vox paused.

“Oh,” he said faintly, straightening. So that was that. That explained a lot, actually. The conclusion settled in his chest with a dull, reasonable weight.

Vox stepped into the hallway, paused, turning back to look at Alastor one more time. He stood in his office doorway, one hand on the frame, his expression unreadable in the dim hallway lighting.

"Thank you," Vox said, the words surprising him even as they emerged. "For the tea. And for letting me sleep."

Something flickered across Alastor's face too quickly to identify. "It seemed the practical choice given your condition. Good night."

The door closed with quiet finality, the lock engaging with a soft click.

Vox stood in the empty hallway, his fever climbing and his thoughts spiraling, wondering what exactly Alastor was doing in that office that required privacy even from his supposedly trusted contractor.

Chapter 42

The silence had settled over the office, comfortable and unobtrusive. Alastor made another notation on the programming schedule in front of him, his fountain pen moving smoothly across the page. The autumn lineup was taking shape nicely, assuming Eleanor's symphony connections panned out and the technical challenges of orchestral recording could be adequately addressed.

He'd need to coordinate with the engineering staff about microphone configurations. Vincent's suggestion about multiple positioning had merit, though implementing it would require equipment purchases that would need to be justified to station management. Perhaps if he framed it as investment in premium content that would attract higher tier advertisers...

His thoughts trailed off as awareness crept in slowly. The office was too quiet. It wasn't the productive silence of two people working in companionable parallel, but the empty quiet of being alone. Except he wasn't alone. Vincent was still here, waiting on the couch.

Alastor looked up from his papers. "Vincent, you should probably..."

The words died.

The man had dozed off. His body was leaned back against the couch's arm, tilted sideways at an angle that looked profoundly uncomfortable. His jaw had gone slack, his mouth slightly open, one arm hanging off the couch edge toward the floor.

Alastor leaned forward slightly, narrowing his eyes. This couldn't be real. Nobody actually fell asleep that quickly in someone else's office during what was supposed to be a brief waiting period. It had to be performance, another manipulation to elicit some kind of response.

But the breathing was too even, too deep. The muscle tension was completely absent in ways that were difficult to fake. And Vincent's face had smoothed out in sleep, losing the offputting

sharpness that characterized his waking expressions.

He'd really just fallen asleep.

Alastor leaned back in his chair with a sigh that carried more exasperation than the situation probably warranted.

A wave of irritation rolled through him as he replayed the evening's events. Vincent crashing into his meeting with Eleanor, handling his belongings without permission, creating enough disruption that she'd left early to escape the awkwardness. The entire interaction had been a masterclass in social incompetence, the type that burned bridges and poisoned professional relationships.

And for what? So Vincent could deliver a progress report that could have waited until Monday and engage in feverish rambling about how excited he was about technology?

Alastor drummed his fingers on the desk, studying Vincent's sleeping form. The man was useful, certainly. The technical knowledge was genuine and the innovations he was developing had real revolutionary potential. But utility meant nothing if Vincent kept sabotaging Alastor's existing professional network with his complete inability to read social situations or respect boundaries.

Ruining what was already established for theoretical future advantage seemed profoundly stupid. Alastor didn't like gambling. Preferred building on solid foundations rather than betting everything on uncertain outcomes. And Vincent's behavior tonight had cost him goodwill with Eleanor that might take months to rebuild, all for a conversation that had accomplished nothing that couldn't have been handled through Barbara.

He looked at Vincent again, taking in the awkward angle, the slack jaw, the complete absence of dignity in his sleeping posture. This man was so profoundly socially inept. How had he survived this long in professional environments without someone strangling him?

Alastor's thoughts slowly shifted to more practical concerns. The trip was going to need scheduling soon. Probably sometime in the next week, after Vincent finished the second

component stage but before... what was the third phase? The integration testing? He'd need to review the timeline to get the exact sequence right.

The station in Hartford wanted him for their annual broadcast symposium. Three days of networking with other regional broadcasters, ostensibly about sharing best practices but really about posturing and establishing pecking orders. Alastor found these events tedious but necessary, the kind of professional obligation that couldn't be avoided without damaging his reputation.

He'd need to bring someone from the television side. Someone who could speak intelligently about the medium's development and provide useful perspective during the panel discussions. Definitely not Vincent. The man was too unreliable, too prone to catastrophic social failures. Alastor could picture it now, Vincent interrupting important conversations, handling other people's belongings without permission, falling asleep during presentations.

The thought of being trapped in Hartford with Vincent for three days made something in Alastor's chest tighten with preemptive dread.

He looked down at his papers, trying to refocus on the programming schedule. The trip could theoretically be pleasant. Getting away from the station's daily grind, from the constant demands and compromises that characterized his work here. A few days in a different city with different people and different routines.

But he didn't particularly want to go. The symposium would be full of people performing their professional personas, everyone jockeying for status and recognition, the whole affair one extended exercise in strategic socializing. Exhausting in ways that regular work wasn't, requiring constant vigilance and performance without the payoff of genuine connection or achievement.

A soft sound interrupted his thoughts.

Alastor's attention snapped to Vincent. The weatherman was muttering something, words too quiet and slurred to make out clearly. His head moved slightly against the couch arm, his expression flickering through emotions too quickly to track.

Fever dreams probably. The man was clearly ill, had been increasingly dysfunctional throughout their conversation earlier. Alastor should have sent him home immediately instead of letting him stay and fall asleep.

He stared at Vincent for a long moment, his mind cataloging details. The way Vincent's fingers twitched slightly, as if reaching for something, the small crease between his eyebrows that probably meant whatever he was dreaming about wasn't entirely pleasant and the slight sheen of sweat visible on his forehead even from across the room.

Alastor stood slowly, his movements careful. It might be useful to know what Vincent's unguarded thoughts revealed. What secrets slipped out when his conscious mind wasn't carefully controlling every word and gesture. People often spoke during fever dreams, their inhibitions weakened by illness, their defenses compromised.

He crossed the office quietly, his footsteps absorbed by the carpet. Leaned over the couch, positioning himself close enough to hear clearly if Vincent said anything intelligible. Their faces were only inches apart now, close enough that Alastor could see individual eyelashes, could track the movement beneath Vincent's closed eyelids as his eyes followed whatever images his sleeping mind was generating.

Vincent's breathing was harsh and shallow, congestion rattling in his chest with each exhale. His lips moved again, forming shapes that might have been words but came out as meaningless syllables. Whatever he was dreaming about, it wasn't translating into useful information.

Alastor tilted his head, focusing his attention completely on Vincent's face. Watching for any sign of consciousness, any indication that this sleeping performance might be exactly that, a performance designed to make Alastor let his guard down.

Soft knocking at the door made Alastor straighten immediately.

The movement was graceless in a way he rarely allowed himself to be. His heart rate had spiked, adrenaline flooding his system with the immediate panic of being caught in a position that would be extremely difficult to explain. Why was he leaning over his sleeping contractor? What possible legitimate reason could he offer?

He walked to the door and opened it with more force than necessary, stepping into the hallway and pulling the door mostly closed behind him.

Barbara stood there with her coat already on, her purse in hand. She looked tired, the end of day exhaustion that came from work well done. "Alastor, I'm leaving for the day. Everything alright in there?"

"Yes." The word came out slightly too forceful. Alastor adjusted his tone, letting his smile warm into something more natural. "Everything's fine. Have a pleasant evening."

Barbara's eyes tracked past him toward the partially open office door. "What about that man? Whittman? Is he still here?"

Alastor paused for just a fraction of a second. "He fell asleep."

"What?" Barbara's confusion was evident in her tone and her expression. "Why? What happened?"

"I'm not entirely certain. I think he's sick. He's been displaying symptoms of illness all evening." Alastor gestured vaguely toward the office. "He simply dozed off while waiting on the couch."

"Oh." Barbara's expression shifted to understanding mixed with concern. "Yes, he definitely looked sick when he was at my desk earlier. I could tell something was wrong. Wait one second."

She disappeared back toward her desk, returning moments later with a shawl. The fabric was knitted, obviously handmade, with patterns that suggested considerable time and skill went into its creation.

“I usually keep it over my lap while I’m working,” Barbara explained, holding it up. “My mother made it so I wouldn’t get cold sitting here all day. I’m heading home for the evening anyway, so he can use it. He shouldn’t be sleeping with a fever and no proper covering.”

"Does he have a fever?" Alastor kept his tone neutral, carefully uninvested.

"Check!" Barbara was already moving past him into the office, her practical nature overriding any concerns about barging into his private space.

Alastor followed, watching as she approached the couch. It was obvious she had dealt with sick people before. She draped the shawl over Vincent's upper body gently, tucking it around his shoulders the way one might with a child.

"Check his forehead," she instructed, not looking away from her task.

Alastor really didn't want to. The thought of touching Vincent's fevered skin made something in his stomach twist with distaste. But refusing would seem strange, would raise questions about why he was so reluctant to perform a simple act of basic human concern.

He reached out and pressed the back of his hand to Vincent's forehead.

The heat was shocking. Vincent's skin was burning up, radiating temperature that felt wrong and dangerous. And worse, it was wet. A thin layer of sweat coated his forehead, warm and clammy under Alastor’s hand.

Alastor fought the urge to immediately wipe his hand on Vincent's shirt. Or on his own pants. Or on literally any surface that would remove the sensation from his skin. But Barbara was watching and reacting with visible disgust to something so minor would seem bizarre.

"Yes," he said, his voice carefully controlled. "I think he has a fever."

"Poor thing." Barbara's sympathy sounded genuine despite her earlier comments about not particularly liking Vincent. "I don't have any medicine on me. Do you?"

"No. I don't typically keep medical supplies in my office." Alastor had managed to casually wipe his hand on the side of his pants while Barbara was focused on Vincent, the gesture hopefully subtle enough to pass unnoticed.

Barbara sighed, straightening up from the couch. "Alright, well I'm sure he'll be fine. Why don't you leave him here while you're doing tonight's broadcast? He'll probably sleep until you come back, and it's better than trying to move him in his current state."

The suggestion made every instinct Alastor possessed scream in protest. Leave this man alone in his private office? Unsupervised access to his belongings, his papers, room that contained things that he absolutely could not be trusted with?

"I don't..." he started.

"I'm sure it'll be fine." Barbara was already heading toward the door. "He'll probably sleep through the whole broadcast. Just wake him when you get back and send him home."

"Barbara..."

"Good night, Alastor. Don't work too late." She was gone, her footsteps receding down the hallway, leaving him alone with his unconscious, feverish contractor who was definitely going to snoop through everything the moment Alastor left.

Alastor stood over Vincent for a long moment after Barbara's departure, debating whether to wake him immediately and force him to leave despite his clearly compromised state. It would be the sensible thing.

But the man looked genuinely terrible. And forcing him out into the cold evening while burning up with fever felt wrong in ways that Alastor didn't particularly want to examine his

reluctance about.

He leaned down slowly, his movements careful. Vincent's glasses were still perched on his nose, slightly askew from his sleeping position. Alastor reached out and removed them gently, sliding them off without disturbing Vincent's sleep.

The action was justified easily enough in his mind. He needed to check something. Had been increasingly certain that Vincent was faking his need for glasses, using them as part of whatever vulnerable persona he was constructing. Glasses made people look less threatening, more intellectual, more deserving of protection and assistance. It was exactly the kind of manipulative detail Vincent would deploy.

Alastor walked back to his desk, holding Vincent's glasses by the frames. He kept his attention split between the glasses in his hand and Vincent on the couch, alert for any sign that this sleeping performance might be exactly that.

But Vincent remained motionless except for the steady rise and fall of his chest, completely unconscious to Alastor's theft.

Alastor removed his own glasses and brought Vincent's close to his eyes, not quite putting them on but close enough to see through the lenses clearly. The distortion was immediate and severe. Strong prescription, significantly stronger than Alastor's own. The world warped through Vincent's lenses, shapes bending and blurring in ways that would make normal vision almost impossible without them.

He hummed softly, setting the glasses down on his desk.

He'd been so certain Vincent was faking. The glasses had seemed too perfectly aligned with the vulnerable aesthetic Vincent projected, too convenient as a prop. But the prescription was genuine, strong enough that Vincent would be genuinely impaired without it.

Alastor had been proven wrong. The realization was uncomfortable, suggesting his read on Vincent's deceptions wasn't as accurate as he'd believed. If he'd misjudged something as

simple as whether glasses were real, what else might he be misjudging about Vincent's behavior and motivations?

He sat at his desk, his mind churning through recent interactions, reanalyzing them in light of this new information. Vincent had seemed surprised by Alastor's knowledge about Eleanor's marriage and children and had listened carefully. Which suggested he really had thought Eleanor might be romantic interest, really had been that oblivious to the social context of their conversation.

And the excitement about the technology earlier. That had read as genuine too, unfiltered enthusiasm bleeding through fever induced disinhibition. Not calculated manipulation but actual feeling expressed without strategic consideration.

Maybe Vincent wasn't as deliberately deceptive as Alastor had assumed. Maybe he was just profoundly socially incompetent, his behavior reading as manipulation when it was actually just dysfunction.

The thought was oddly disappointing. Deliberate deception was at least interesting, suggested intelligence and planning. But simple social incompetence combined with technical brilliance? That was just sad.

Alastor's hands moved without conscious direction as he began cleaning Vincent's glasses with careful attention, removing the grime that had accumulated on the lenses and frames. The action was automatic, habitual from years of maintaining his own eyewear.

Time passed in the quiet office. Alastor worked through correspondence that needed attention, made notes about the Hartford symposium, refined his thoughts about the autumn programming schedule. The glasses sat on his desk, folded neatly, their lenses now clear and properly maintained.

Eventually his watch indicated it was time for the evening broadcast. Alastor stood, gathering the materials he'd need. Glanced at Vincent still sleeping on the couch.

Barbara had suggested his fever might go down on its own. Alastor walked over and pressed the back of his hand to Vincent's cheek, unwilling to touch his forehead again but needing to verify temperature. The heat was still present but less intense than before. Still feverish but not dangerously so.

He wished someone else would handle this. Wished Vincent had stayed home where he belonged instead of showing up here and making himself Alastor's problem. But wishing accomplished nothing, and the broadcast wouldn't wait for his personal inconvenience to resolve itself.

The broadcast passed smoothly, as they always did. Alastor slipped into his performance persona with practiced ease, his voice carrying warmth and theatrical flair into homes across the city.

He took several calls from listeners, their questions ranging from music requests to commentary about current events. One elderly woman wanted to know his thoughts about the upcoming mayoral election. A young man asked for advice about courting a girl whose father disapproved of him. The usual stream of human concerns that people felt comfortable sharing with a disembodied voice on the radio.

Between segments, while records played, Alastor's mind wandered to last week's work. The disposal had gone smoothly, as they always did when he was careful about planning. The man had been exactly what Alastor had suspected, confirmation arriving through methods that would have disturbed the police if they'd known such verification was possible.

The city was better off without him. That much was certain. Whether Alastor's motivations in removing him were primarily altruistic or primarily entertaining was a question he didn't particularly care to examine too closely.

When the broadcast concluded, Alastor made his way back to his office with the usual post show exhaustion. Two hours of sustained performance took energy even when the performance was familiar and comfortable.

He set the stack of papers he was carrying down on his desk and only then did he notice the absence. The glasses were gone.

The realization made annoyance spike hot and immediate through his chest. Vincent was awake then. Had been awake long enough to retrieve his glasses and return to the couch. And was now pretending to still be asleep, maintaining the fiction for reasons Alastor couldn't begin to guess.

The deception was obvious and insulting in its transparency. Did Vincent think Alastor was stupid? Think he wouldn't notice the missing glasses? Think he could just snoop around the office and then play innocent when caught?

He'd definitely gone through Alastor's desk. Probably tried the locked drawer, might have succeeded in opening it if he had any skill with improvised lockpicks. Had handled his belongings, invaded his privacy, violated his space while pretending unconsciousness.

The irritation at being played for a fool burned through Alastor's carefully maintained composure.

He walked to the light switches and flipped all of them simultaneously, flooding the office with aggressive fluorescent brightness.

"Okay Whittman, out." His voice carried across the room with deliberate volume, designed to be unpleasant and jarring. "I have to go home. Time for you to leave."

The satisfaction of watching Vincent wince at the lights was immediate and petty. Good. Let him be uncomfortable. Let him experience consequences for his deceptions, even if those consequences were just sensory irritation.

Vincent sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes. It was a performance that might have been convincing if Alastor hadn't known it was fake. "Sorry. I genuinely didn't realize I'd fallen asleep."

The lie was so blatant Alastor almost laughed. "Yes, I know. You need to leave though. I can't leave you here. Security risk."

"You think I'm going to steal something?"

The question felt loaded, defensive in ways that suggested guilt. Alastor let his gaze cut sideways toward Vincent, conveying skepticism without verbal accusation. "I do not own this station. I just follow the rules about unsupervised access to private offices after hours."

The conversation proceeded awkwardly, Vincent asking about Alastor's evening plans with increasingly obvious interest. The questions felt invasive, stalkerish, like Vincent was trying to catalog Alastor's routine for purposes that couldn't possibly be innocent.

When Vincent suggested visiting, Alastor felt his metaphorical hackles rise. The man was behaving like a predator circling prey, testing boundaries, seeing how close he could get before triggering defensive responses. Every instinct Alastor possessed screamed warnings about letting Vincent anywhere near his personal space.

"That wasn't an invitation," he said flatly, trying to establish boundaries that Vincent seemed determined to ignore.

"You could visit me then."

The suggestion made Alastor's skin crawl.

"I'll think about it." The lie was automatic, the kind of polite deflection people used when they meant absolutely not but were too civilized to say so directly.

The interaction had devolved into something surreal and uncomfortable. Vincent wrapped in Barbara's shawl like some kind of fever addled lunatic, refusing to leave, asking increasingly invasive questions about Alastor's plans. His behavior read less like social incompetence and more like genuine instability, the kind of concerning fixation that might warrant security intervention if it escalated further.

When Vincent finally stumbled toward the door, still clutching the shawl, Alastor felt relief wash over him. This had been exhausting in ways that normal social interaction never was, draining in its constant demand for vigilance and boundary maintenance.

"Thank you," Vincent said at the threshold, his voice carrying unexpected sincerity. "For the blanket. And for letting me sleep."

The gratitude landed wrong, genuine in ways that made Alastor's prepared responses feel inadequate. He'd expected continued deception, more manipulation, not actual appreciation for basic courtesy.

"It seemed the practical choice given your condition," Alastor said carefully. "Good night."

He closed the door and locked it, then stood there for a moment listening to Vincent's footsteps recede down the hallway. The elevator dinged. Descended. Silence returned.

Alastor walked back to his desk and sat down heavily.

The evening had been a disaster, but beneath the irritation and lingering discomfort there was something else, harder to ignore the longer Alastor sat with it. A nagging awareness that Vincent’s behavior, inappropriate and invasive as it had been, had not actually been malicious this time. It had been thoughtless, poorly timed, and executed with a complete lack of understanding of normal social boundaries, but nothing more than that.

That realization only made things worse.

Vincent would have noticed the lenses. He would have realized someone had cleaned them while he slept, and the thought made Alastor's skin prickle with unease. The embarrassment of his unnecessary kindness settling heavily. Vincent was perceptive in the most inconvenient ways. He would not miss something like that.

Alastor started gathering his belongings with more force than necessary. He needed to go home. He needed distance, and preferably a night where he did not replay every misstep in his head.

Still, as he pulled on his coat and prepared to leave, his attention kept drifting back to the couch where Vincent had been sleeping. To the absence of the shawl. To the cushions that still held the shape of his body, as if he had only just stepped away.

Alastor turned off the lights and left his office, locking the door behind him.

For now, all Alastor wanted was distance and the comfort of his own space where invasive weathermen with boundary issues couldn't reach him.

Chapter 43

Vox stood in front of the fish tank, tapping food flakes into the water absentmindedly. The sound of the flakes hitting the surface made a soft pattering that was oddly satisfying. The guppies surfaced immediately, their mouths opening and closing frantically.

The larger one ate aggressively, its body angling sideways to shoulder the smaller one aside. It claimed the best morsels, moving through the water like it owned the entire tank. The smaller one hung back, waiting for scraps with the resigned patience of someone who had learned its place in the hierarchy, its damaged tail fin making quick movements difficult.

"I feed you two so much," Vox said to them, his tone carrying mock accusation. He watched the larger fish take another aggressive bite at the flakes, the movement casual and almost lazy. "Where are your babies? You're supposed to be reproducing. That's the whole point of having two of you in here."

He knew perfectly well he didn't feed them nearly enough. The container he was holding was supposed to be used daily, but he could see from the level that it had lasted nearly three weeks instead of one. He deduced that stress and inadequate nutrition *probably* prevented successful breeding in guppies.

"Well, you might have marital issues," he continued, watching the larger guppy eat. The smaller fish darted away, seeking refuge behind the plastic plant that provided minimal shelter. "Trying to eat each other and whatnot. But that's no big deal. Plenty of couples have problems and still manage to produce offspring. You just need to work through your differences."

The fish, predictably, offered no response to this relationship advice. They continued their eternal circuit around the tank, predator and prey locked in a dance that would only end when one of them died.

Vox set down the container of fish food with more force than necessary, the plastic hitting the table with a sharp clack that made him wince. "Speaking of..."

Margaret. He needed to deal with Margaret. Needed to repair whatever damage his behavior at the jazz club had caused before it metastasized into something that couldn't be fixed. The flowers were a good start, but flowers alone wouldn't be enough. He needed to present the complete package. Vincent Whittman, devoted boyfriend, someone who made mistakes but recognized them and worked to do better.

The performance would require every skill he'd developed over decades of manipulation. But first, he needed to look the part.

The shower water was lukewarm at best, the building's hot water system struggling as always to meet demand from dozens of apartments simultaneously.

He spent longer than usual at the mirror after the shower, examining his reflection carefully. The fever had left its marks. His face was still slightly too pale, dark circles under his eyes more prominent than they should be.

He selected his better shirt from the closet, the one he'd been saving for important occasions. Expensive by Vincent's standards even if it was objectively cheap. No coffee stains or frayed cuffs. The collar sat properly instead of curling at the edges.

He washed his face again for good measure, patted it dry with a towel that was probably overdue for washing but would have to suffice. Then reached for his glasses to clean them, holding them up to the light to check for smudges.

The lenses were already spotless. He smiled, putting them on carefully. He maintained them so well. Obviously his subconscious attention to personal presentation extended even to things he didn't remember doing. Just another sign that he was getting his life back under control, that the various disasters of the past week hadn't broken anything fundamental in his ability to function.

He needed to look perfect for this to work. Margaret deserved someone who put effort into their appearance, who visually demonstrated that the relationship mattered. And Vox needed Margaret to believe he was that someone, at least for long enough to smooth over recent disasters.

The walk to work carried him past storefronts that were just beginning to open for the day. The flower shop he'd never paid attention to before suddenly seemed relevant, its display window bright with colors.

Vox paused on the sidewalk, studying the arrangements through the glass. Roses were the obvious choice. Roses communicated specific intent in ways that other flowers didn't, their cultural meaning so deeply embedded that anyone would understood their significance.

He had the money. Not his own money, technically, but money that was functionally his to use. The payment Alastor had given him for David's component budget was more than sufficient to cover expenses with room left over for discretionary spending. And flowers qualified as discretionary, surely.

The shop's interior smelled overwhelming. An elderly woman behind the counter looked up as Vox entered, her expression shifting into professional friendliness.

"Can I help you find something?"

"Roses," Vox said without preamble. "A dozen. Red, if you have them. Nothing too elaborate, just clean and classic."

The woman smiled, the expression suggesting she'd heard similar requests many times before. "Of course. For a special someone?"

"Something like that." Vox watched as she selected stems from the refrigerated case, arranging them with practiced efficiency into a bouquet that managed to look both expensive and understated.

The price made him wince internally, though he kept his expression neutral. He could afford this using David's budget without issue. The engineer was being paid more than enough anyway, receiving compensation that far exceeded market rates for his skills.

As Vox paid, counting out bills from the envelope Alastor had provided, a thought surfaced unbidden. Did this mean Alastor had bought Margaret flowers? The money was technically Alastor's, after all.

He frowned, working through the logic. No, this was salary. Money he'd earned through his work on the project, compensation for services rendered and expertise provided. Once salary was paid it became the employee's money, no longer carrying any connection to its original source.

If he bought flowers with his salary it didn't mean Sterling was buying flowers on his behalf. The distinction felt important. Vox rolled it around in his mind as he accepted the wrapped bouquet from the shopkeeper, testing the reasoning for flaws.

He was satisfied with this conclusion. He'd been on a logical roll lately, his thinking sharp and clear despite recent fever induced confusion. Everything was coming together exactly as it should, each problem solved through rational analysis.

The walk from the flower shop to the station took around fifteen minutes, during which Vox became increasingly aware of being observed. People glanced at the roses, their expressions ranging from indifferent to amused to knowing. An older woman smiled at him on the street corner, the expression carrying assumptions about young love and romantic gestures. Two teenagers whispered to each other as he passed, their giggles suggesting they found something entertaining about the spectacle.

Vox kept his expression neutral, his stride confident. Let them look. Let them make whatever assumptions they wanted. The flowers were a tool, a means to an end, and public visibility only increased their effectiveness.

The station's morning crowd largely ignored him once he was inside. The newsroom was already busy, everyone focused on their own urgent tasks. A few people glanced at the roses with mild curiosity before returning to their typewriters and phone calls. Someone from accounting walked past without seeming to notice at all, too absorbed in whatever paperwork they were carrying.

Vox navigated through the maze of desks and filing cabinets with the bouquet held carefully. The cellophane wrapping crinkled softly with each movement, catching light from the overhead fixtures.

He found Margaret at her desk, deep in conversation with Susan. Their heads were bent close together, Margaret gesturing animatedly about something while Susan listened with exaggerated interest. The positioning was perfect. An audience would transform this whole thing from private apology into public demonstration of commitment. Would create witnesses who could spread the story throughout the office, reinforcing the narrative that Vincent Whittman was a devoted boyfriend who recognized when he'd made mistakes.

"Margaret!"

She turned in her chair, the movement quick and startled. Her expression shifted from concentration to shock in the space of a heartbeat, her mouth opening slightly in genuine surprise.

"Oh my god!" Susan's voice rose with genuine excitement, her hands coming together in that particular gesture of delight at witnessing romantic gestures. She practically bounced in her chair, her face lighting up. "Vincent! Are those for Margaret? They're gorgeous!"

Vox moved closer, his movements confident. He'd practiced this approach in his mind during the walk over, choreographing each gesture for maximum impact. He presented the roses with a small bow, nothing theatrical but enough to suggest courtly respect. Then he rested his hand on Margaret's shoulder as he turned his attention to Susan, finally greeting her.

Margaret looked up at him from her seated position, her head tilted back to maintain eye contact. Her expression cycled through confusion and happiness and something more complicated that Vox couldn't quite parse. Conflict, maybe. The look of someone who wanted to accept the gesture but wasn't entirely convinced it erased previous failures.

But the happiness was present and that was the important part. The shock value of the gesture was working exactly as intended.

"These are gorgeous," Susan repeated, leaning in to examine the roses more closely. Her fingers reached out but didn't quite touch the petals, hovering with the restraint of someone who knew these weren't meant for her. "Margaret, you are so lucky. Vincent, you are setting the bar impossibly high for the rest of us. My husband hasn't bought me flowers in three years."

"She deserves the best," Vox said smoothly, squeezing Margaret's shoulder gently.

"Well I'll leave you lovebirds alone!" Susan was already standing, gathering the papers she'd been reviewing with Margaret. Her smile was wide and knowing, the expression of someone who felt they were witnessing a genuinely romantic moment. "Margaret, I want details later! All the details!"

She hurried away with the enthusiasm of someone eager to spread gossip to other corners of the office. Within the hour, everyone would know that Vincent Whittman had brought Margaret roses. The story would circulate and grow in the telling.

Margaret watched Susan retreat, her eyes tracking the other woman's departure before turning her attention back to Vox. The roses sat in her lap now, the cellophane crinkling as she adjusted her grip. Her expression had settled into something more serious, the initial shock fading into evaluation.

"Vincent, I wanted to talk to you about what happened at the jazz club..." she began, her tone careful.

"I know." Vox cut her off, his voice carrying false sincerity. "And even though I have a reason for why I acted that way, I know I still messed up. There's no excuse for abandoning you at the jazz club. It was thoughtless and disrespectful and you deserved so much better than being left alone with our friends while I ran off on some work emergency that probably could have waited until Monday."

Margaret's mouth opened slightly, clearly preparing to respond. Her body language suggested she had more to say, that the prepared speech hadn't been fully delivered. But Vox pressed forward, not giving her space to potentially reject his apology before he'd fully deployed his charm offensive.

The key was maintaining control of the conversation's direction. Letting her feel heard while ensuring the narrative moved toward forgiveness rather than continued grievance. It was a delicate balance, requiring careful attention to her responses and willingness to adjust tactics mid conversation.

"Do you want coffee?" He smiled, warm and attentive, his hand sliding from her shoulder to rest gently on her upper arm. "I can bring you coffee. Your usual from the cafe down the street? Or would you prefer tea? I remember you mentioning you like that particular Earl Grey blend they serve in the cafeteria."

The specificity was intentional, demonstrating that he paid attention to her preferences. That he remembered small details from previous conversations. That she mattered enough for him to retain information about her likes and dislikes.

"Yes..." Margaret's resistance was visibly crumbling, her expression softening despite obvious efforts to maintain appropriate skepticism. "Coffee would be nice. With cream, no sugar. Thank you."

Vox retrieved the coffee with surprising speed, navigating the morning crowd outside the building with practiced ease. The vendor had his order ready before he even finished speaking. The transaction took less than three minutes total, just long enough to give Margaret time to process the roses and prepare herself for his return.

When he came back, he found she'd arranged the roses in a vase someone had produced from office supplies. The flowers sat prominently on her desk, visible to anyone walking past.

Margaret accepted the coffee cup with a small smile, the first genuine warmth she'd shown him since the jazz club disaster. "Thank you. You didn't have to do all this."

"I did though." Vox settled into the chair beside her desk, the one usually occupied by visitors discussing work matters. "You're important to me. I need you to know that, even when my behavior suggests otherwise."

He wasn't apologizing, exactly. Wasn't debasing himself or accepting blame. Just acknowledging that things had gone wrong while subtly reframing the narrative so Margaret felt heard and valued without Vox having to actually admit fault in ways that would damage his position.

It worked perfectly. Margaret relaxed slowly, her hands, which had been wrapped tightly around the coffee cup, loosened their grip.

By the time Vox suggested doing something together that weekend, Margaret seemed to have fully forgiven him.

"I'd love to," she said, then her expression fell slightly. "But I can't this weekend. I have business meetings. Client dinners and coordination sessions. Very tedious but necessary for maintaining relationships with our advertisers."

"Oh?" Vox was already scanning the office space, his attention only partially engaged now that the primary objective had been accomplished. The flowers had worked, the immediate crisis was resolved, and his brain was moving on to other things. "With who?"

"There's this client we're trying to land," Margaret explained, launching into details about advertising contracts and corporate relationships that Vox barely processed. Her voice became background noise, pleasant and familiar but not requiring active attention. Something about a manufacturing company looking to expand their presence. Discussions about rates and time slots and demographic targeting.

"And also the radio people will be there for some of the sessions," Margaret continued, apparently not noticing that Vox's attention had drifted. "Cross coordination about promotional opportunities and bundled advertising packages."

Vox's attention snapped back to full focus with almost physical force. His eyes locked onto Margaret's face, his posture straightening. "Who? The radio host?"

His voice came out more intense than intended, the words sharp with sudden interest.

"No, not the host." Margaret laughed lightly, as if the suggestion was absurd. "Why would I be meeting with him? He's talent, not administration. Just the advertising staff from the radio station. Their account managers and media buyers."

"Good luck." Vox felt the spike of interest deflate immediately, like a balloon with a slow leak. If Alastor wasn't involved, the meeting held no importance whatsoever. Just tedious business discussion with people who had nothing to offer him.

He started cataloging weekend projects he could work on instead. The transmitter specifications needed review. David's schematics required detailed analysis to ensure nothing had been missed. Maybe he could visit some component suppliers, verify pricing and availability for the next phase of construction.

"Do you want to come?" Margaret's voice cut through his mental planning.

Vox's brain screeched to a halt. "What?"

"To the meetings. Do you want to come with me?" Margaret leaned forward slightly, her expression earnest. "It would be nice having you there. They're all men and sometimes the situation gets..." She trailed off, the implication clear without needing to be spelled out.

Vox opened his mouth to decline automatically. He had zero interest in spending his weekend at tedious business meetings with advertising people. But something in Margaret's expression made him pause. The vulnerability of asking for support in a professional context where she felt disadvantaged. The unspoken request that he act as ally and shield against the casual disrespect she might experience.

Saying no wasn't an option. Not if he wanted to maintain the relationship he'd just repaired. Not if he wanted Margaret to continue being a useful ally at the station, someone who could smooth over social difficulties and provide cover for whatever he may need.

The flowers had bought him forgiveness for past transgressions, but refusing this request would immediately burn through that good will.

"Alright, that's no problem." His smile remained warm despite internal resignation. The words came out smooth and natural, as if he'd been planning to agree all along. "I had plans but I'll reschedule. Of course I'll come with you. These advertising people need to learn to respect your expertise."

Margaret's face lit up with genuine happiness, her smile bright. "Really? Thank you, Vincent. That means a lot to me. I know these things are boring but having you there will make it much more bearable."

She touched the roses again, her fingers gentle on the petals. The gesture was almost reverent, treating them with care that suggested she genuinely valued both the flowers and what they represented. "And thank you for these. They're beautiful. I haven't gotten flowers in... well, it's been a while. This was really thoughtful of you."

Vox felt no particular affection in response to her gratitude. Just satisfaction at having successfully executed a plan. The relationship was fixed and Margaret was happy. The social foundation he needed for workplace stability was restored. Everything was proceeding exactly as it should.

He was walking back toward his desk, mentally cataloging the morning's victories and already planning how to minimize the tedium of weekend business meetings, when Sterling's voice cut through the office noise like a knife.

"Whittman! My office, now!"

Vox let out a deep sigh.

Chapter 44

The bellow carried across the entire newsroom, making several people look up from their work. Vox turned and followed Sterling's retreating form, matching his pace. The station manager moved uncharacteristically fast, his shoulders tight with stress.

They reached Sterling's office and he gestured impatiently for Vox to enter and close the door. Vox complied, pulling the door shut behind him carefully.

"What is it?" Vox kept his tone light, almost playful. Testing the waters before committing to a more serious approach. "Am I getting fired? Are my three months of probation up already?"

He was joking, obviously. The probation couldn't possibly have concluded yet. But maybe Sterling had decided to accelerate the timeline, had found some violation that warranted immediate termination. Better to approach it with humor, make light of the possibility rather than show any concern.

Sterling's expression remained grim, his jaw tight with stress that hopefully had nothing to do with Vincent's employment status. "Boy, I wish," he muttered, the words carrying more sincerity than Vox appreciated.

"Oh." The response was flat, uncertain. Vox's brain scrambled to recalibrate, to figure out what was actually happening if this wasn't a termination meeting. "That's... nice to hear."

Sterling was already rifling through papers on his desk, not looking at Vox, shuffling documents around without care. "No, I need you for the broadcast this evening. You feeling less sick? Because I need someone who can sit under lights for an hour without passing out or vomiting on camera, and my options are extremely limited right now."

"Yes!" The enthusiasm burst out before Vox could moderate it, genuine excitement at the opportunity flooding through his chest and overriding any attempt at playing it cool.

This was what he wanted. What he'd been working toward since the last broadcast. Another chance to be seen, to demonstrate competence, to remind everyone at the station what he was capable of.

Sterling's mouth twisted, the expression suggesting Vox's eagerness was somehow distasteful. Like watching someone get too excited about something that should be treated with professional dignity. "Don't sound so pleased," he said, already turning his attention back to his papers. "This isn't a promotion. Chuck called in sick and I don't have better options on short notice. You're third string at best."

He shoved aside one stack of documents to reveal another underneath, his frustration with the situation evident in the aggressive way he handled his own filing system. “The man’s been unreliable ever since that breakdown on air. Can’t trust him under pressure anymore. Voice goes shaky, hands tremble, whole nine yards. But finding a replacement takes time I don’t have, so I’m stuck working with what’s available.”

Sterling went on without checking whether Vox had asked. “His wife’s cheating on him. Has been for a while, from what I hear.” He flipped a page. “People bring their problems to work and expect no one to notice.”

Vox had to work to keep his face straight as Sterling looked up finally, his eyes sharp and assessing as they tracked over Vox's appearance. Taking in the nice shirt, the careful grooming, the overall presentation made it look like he had actually tried this morning. His expression suggested this was acceptable.

He explained quickly and without ceremony. The regular evening anchor was out at the last minute, sick enough that putting him under studio lights would be cruel and potentially disastrous. Some kind of stomach illness, the details weren't important except that it made him unavailable.

And tonight's broadcast had eyes on it. Advertisers who'd specifically tuned in to evaluate content quality before committing to larger contracts, network people considering whether this regional station was worth incorporating into their broader programming strategies. Someone important who would notice every stumble and every awkward pause and use those observations to make decisions about the station's future.

"You've done this before," Sterling added, the acknowledgment grudging. His tone suggested he was deeply unhappy about having to rely on Vox but saw no better alternatives. "You didn't embarrass the station last time. Didn't freeze up or fumble the copy or do anything actively stupid. At least not on camera. That's not exactly a high bar but it's the bar we're working with today."

He leaned forward, his hands flat on the desk, his expression deadly serious. The casual irritation had transformed into something more dangerous. This was Sterling in full authority mode, making absolutely certain his subordinate understood the stakes.

"But let me be crystal clear about something, Whittman. You will read exactly what is put in front of you. You will not improvise, will not editorialize, will not decide on your own what the audience needs to hear. You are a mouthpiece for the copy writers, nothing more. You deliver the words other people have carefully crafted and approved. Understood?"

The emphasis on the final word made it clear this wasn't actually a question.

"Completely understood." Vox kept his voice neutral, professional, giving Sterling no reason to doubt his compliance.

"If you do well tonight," Sterling continued, the words measured, each one chosen with care, "I'll reconsider the probation. Maybe move you off weather permanently if you prove you can handle news without causing disasters or embarrassing the station."

The offer hung in the air.

Sterling looked him over again, his expression skeptical. His eyes tracked from Vox's carefully styled hair down to his polished shoes, cataloging details before returning to his face. "You look like hell still. Can you manage? Because if you're going to collapse mid broadcast I need to know now so I can find someone else. Even if that someone else is our sports guy who's never anchored news in his life."

The threat was clear. Vox was the preferred option but not the only option. Sterling would rather use him but wouldn't hesitate to replace him if there was any doubt about his ability to perform.

Vox smiled, the expression smooth and immediate and completely confident. Years of practice made the performance automatic. "I've never felt better. The fever's completely gone so I can absolutely handle this without any issues whatsoever."

Sterling didn't argue, just nodded once, as if checking an item off a list. "Hair. Suit. Makeup. Rehearsal at five. Don't be late. And Whittman?" He paused, making sure he had Vox's full attention before delivering the final warning. "Don't remind me why I put you on probation in the first place."

When Vox stepped back into the hallway, the adrenaline hit all at once. Sharp and electric, flooding through his system with intensity that made his hands shake slightly and his heart pound.

Everything was lining up perfectly. All the pieces were falling into place exactly as they should, like a puzzle that had been scattered suddenly revealing its intended image.

He passed Margaret's desk on his way back to his own workspace, catching her eye and smiling with genuine pleasure. "I'll be tied up tonight with the evening broadcast," he told her, trying to keep the excitement out of his voice and failing completely. The words came out too fast, too energized, revealing exactly how much this opportunity meant to him. "So I won't be able to do dinner or anything. But I'll definitely be ready for those meetings this weekend."

Margaret's eyebrows rose, her mouth curving into a smile that looked proud. "You're anchoring again? Vincent, that's wonderful! That's a real opportunity, especially with network people watching. I'll definitely be tuning in. Everyone will be watching, I'm sure of it."

The pleasure at her approval was shallow but real. Vox accepted it, let it fuel the already substantial energy flooding his system. He returned to his desk and tried to focus on his regular work, on the weather maps and pressure systems that technically comprised his actual job responsibilities.

But his mind kept jumping ahead to the evening. To the lights and the camera and the satisfaction of being seen by thousands of people simultaneously. To the awareness that maybe this time, somewhere in those thousands might be Alastor, watching him perform, evaluating his competence in ways that mattered more than Sterling's approval ever could.

The afternoon passed in a blur of preparation and mounting anticipation. Time moved strangely, hours compressing into minutes while individual moments stretched into eternities. Vox went through his regular duties on autopilot, his conscious attention already focused on the evening broadcast.

At four thirty he changed into one of the station suits. They kept several on hand for on air talent, maintained by the wardrobe department, properly tailored and pressed. Much better quality than anything he could afford on his weather forecaster salary. The fabric felt expensive, the cut making him look competent and authoritative.

The makeup artist descended on him, dabbing powder across his face to eliminate shine under the hot studio lights. Covering the remaining pallor from his illness, evening out his skin tone, making him camera ready. The process was familiar, almost meditative. He sat still and let her work, his eyes closed, his breathing steady.

Technicians fussed with equipment, adjusting lights and testing camera angles. The heat from the lights was immediate and overwhelming, transforming the cool studio into something much closer to an oven.

Vox caught his reflection in a side mirror and liked what he saw. The suit fit perfectly and the makeup made his features sharp and defined rather than washed out. His hair sat exactly right. He looked like someone who belonged in front of a camera, whose voice deserved to be heard across the city.

He reached up to adjust his glasses out of habit, the frames having slipped slightly during the makeup application. The gesture was automatic, performed without thought.

The makeup artist materialized beside him with startling speed, her hand shooting out to catch Vox's wrist before he could complete the adjustment. "Leave them. Don't touch your

face once you're in position. You'll ruin the powder and creates glare issues."

Vox settled into the anchor desk during rehearsal, the chair still warm from whoever had been testing camera angles earlier. The leather was worn smooth, comfortable in the specific way of furniture that had conformed to human bodies through years of use. The desk surface was clean and organized, everything positioned for easy access without creating visual clutter for the cameras.

Vox finally looked down at the script laid out in front of him. The paper was heavy and official looking, high quality stock rather than the cheap newsprint used for internal memos. Typed cleanly with professional formatting, margins carefully measured. No handwritten notes or last minute changes scratched in pen, just clean copy ready for broadcast.

The first few stories were standard fare. City council voting on budget proposals, their usual tedious bureaucracy transformed into something that sounded important through careful word choice. Traffic accidents that had stalled the evening commute, causing delays that would irritate thousands of drivers. Weather forecast calling for possible snow later in the week, just a mild warning that let people know to prepare without causing panic.

Then Vox frowned, his attention catching on a story placed prominently in the early segment.

A missing person report. Not a quick mention buried in the back half of the broadcast where people might miss it, but a full item with detailed description and contact information for the police. This placement was usually reserved for stories the station wanted audiences to actually retain, to think about and to potentially act upon. This had to be someone important.

He read the name once, then again slower. Adult male, thirty two years old, last seen approximately a week ago in the downtown area near the financial district. Had left work at his usual time but never arrived home. There was no clear explanation for the disappearance yet, no evidence of foul play but also no indication he'd left voluntarily. Police was asking anyone with information to come forward, providing a phone number that took up an entire line of the script.

Vox felt something tighten in his chest, cold and sharp and unwelcome. His breathing remained steady but required conscious attention suddenly.

His brain, unhelpful and always looking for patterns even when patterns didn't exist, jumped immediately to a conclusion it shouldn't. Alastor. This could be Alastor's work. The timing could align roughly, the victim profile vaguely matched what Vox suspected about Alastor's selection criteria based on informed speculation.

The victim was male, which fit. Adult but not elderly, prime of life. Disappeared from a populated area without witnesses, suggesting careful planning and execution. No body discovered yet, which could mean thorough disposal or just that not enough time had passed for discovery.

He almost laughed at himself for the thought. The sound wanted to bubble up from his chest, inappropriate and slightly hysterical. He forced it down hard, swallowing it before it could manifest as sound that might be picked up by the nearby microphones.

This was ridiculous. Missing people didn't automatically mean murder. People disappeared for all kinds of mundane reasons that had nothing to do with serial killers operating in the city. Ran away from debts they couldn't pay, accumulated gambling losses or business failures that made staying impossible. Abandoned families they no longer wanted, started new lives in different cities where nobody knew their history. Mental health crises that caused them to wander off without clear destination or purpose.

The vast majority of missing persons cases resolved without violence. That was simple statistics, documented patterns that anyone with access to police data could verify. Jumping to murder as the first explanation was paranoid and irrational.

And Alastor was smart enough to wait. Why would he kill someone now when the technology that would provide perfect alibis wasn't finished yet? What would be the point of rushing when waiting a few more weeks would make the whole operation infinitely safer?

The portable transmitter was the whole purpose of Vox's involvement in Alastor's life. The reason they'd developed any kind of working relationship at all. It made no sense for Alastor to jeopardize that investment by engaging in risky behavior before the safety net was in place.

Vox didn't believe Alastor was bloodthirsty enough to be unable to control his urges. This wasn't about compulsion or addiction to violence, he was not like the stereotype of killers driven by uncontrollable impulses. Vox knew he was better than that. Killing for Alastor was probably about entertainment, about careful selection and planning and execution. About treating murder as an art form rather than an itch that demanded scratching.

There was no competition driving urgency and no external pressure forcing Alastor to act now instead of later. No rival killer threatening his territory, no detective getting too close to discovering his identity. No logical reason for this to be connected to him at all.

Vox straightened the pages of the script, smoothed them once with his palm. This was just another story, completely unrelated to the two them. To him and Alastor and their business arrangement and the technology being developed. Just unfortunate coincidence, the kind of random tragedy that happened in cities every day.

The producer's voice cut in from off camera, pulling Vox's attention away from the script. Professional and slightly impatient, like he had given these instructions many times before and was tired of repeating them. "Remember to keep your eyes on the copy. Stay steady. Don't linger on any one story for too long. The pacing needs to remain consistent throughout the broadcast. We've got exactly thirty minutes of airtime and every second matters."

Vox nodded, outwardly composed. His expression remained neutral, professional, appropriate for someone preparing to deliver news rather than someone spiraling into paranoid speculation about serial killers. "Understood."

"The emotional tone needs to stay neutral and professional," the producer continued, walking closer to examine Vox's positioning at the desk. "Appropriate gravity for serious stories without being sensational. The missing person segment should get maybe two seconds more weight than standard items, but nothing that suggests you have any personal interest in the poor bugger."

"Of course." Vox's voice remained steady, giving no indication that this particular story had lodged in his mind like a splinter.

But the unease didn't fully leave. It settled instead into the back of his consciousness like static, present but ignorable if he focused on other things. The professional demands of the

broadcast, the technical requirements of camera angles and microphone positioning, the memorization of which stories came in what order.

When rehearsal wrapped, the producer nodded approval and retreated to the control booth. The technicians made final adjustments, tweaking lights and verifying audio levels. Someone called out time checks, counting down the minutes until they'd go live.

The script was left on the desk, waiting for broadcast. Vox stood and moved away from the lights, letting his eyes adjust back to normal illumination. The heat had made him look slightly sweaty despite the makeup designed to prevent that exact problem. He resisted the urge to wipe at his forehead, knowing it would ruin the careful application and require fixing.

The story about the missing person would be read exactly as written. Professional, neutral, appropriately concerned without being sensational. Just another piece of news delivered to homes across the city, people hearing it over dinner or while getting ready for evening activities.

And if Vox's voice carried the slightest edge of uncertainty when he read that particular segment, well, the audience wouldn't know enough to identify it as anything other than appropriate gravity for the subject matter.

He told himself the tightness in his chest was just nerves about the broadcast. Just normal anxiety about performing under observation by important people whose opinions could make or break his career trajectory. Perfectly normal, completely understandable, professional nerves about delivering news to thousands of people while being evaluated by network executives.

The story was probably nothing. The missing man would probably turn up fine. And even if he didn't, even if this was murder, it had nothing to do with Alastor.

Nothing at all.

Vox repeated this to himself several more times while waiting for the broadcast to begin, trying to make the certainty feel real rather than desperately hopeful.

Chapter 45

The meeting room smelled like stale coffee and furniture polish, a combination that somehow made the air feel heavier than it should. Vox had been sitting in the same chair for ninety minutes, listening to advertising executives discuss rate cards and demographic targeting with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for discussing paint drying.

The table was large and polished, designed to seat twelve comfortably. Currently it held nine people, their papers and coffee cups spread across the surface in territorial clusters. Margaret sat to his right, taking notes with focus that suggested she found this genuinely interesting. The advertising people occupied the other side, three men in nearly identical gray suits who kept talking over each other.

Vox's attention had drifted approximately seventy minutes ago and showed no signs of returning.

Before the meeting had started, Jonathan Boucher had cornered him near the coffee service. The radio station owner was shorter than Vox remembered from brief previous encounters, his hairline receding in ways that suggested he'd given up fighting it years ago. But his eyes were sharp, assessing Vox with the focus of someone who made their living evaluating people.

"Whittman, isn't it? From the television side?" Boucher stirred his coffee, the spoon clinking against porcelain. "Do you have a moment?"

The questions he asked had been specific and technical, the kind that would trip up someone without genuine expertise.

Boucher's eyebrows had risen steadily throughout the explanation, his expression shifting from polite interest to genuine impressiveness. "That's remarkably thorough. More detailed than I expected, frankly. Sterling's fortunate to have someone with that kind of technical background on staff."

The compliment had felt good in the moment, validation from someone who actually understood what Vox was talking about. But now, sitting through endless discussion of advertising schedules, the memory felt distant and irrelevant.

"...and the Hartford venue requires we arrive by Thursday afternoon for the preliminary sessions," one of the advertising men was saying, his voice carrying that particular drone of someone reading from prepared notes. He shuffled through papers, squinting at handwritten annotations. "So we'll need to arrange departure Wednesday evening at the latest."

"And the accommodations are all confirmed?" Another voice, higher pitched, slightly anxious. This man kept adjusting his glasses, pushing them up his nose every few seconds in a nervous tic.

"Yes, confirmed. Two rooms reserved under the station's account at the Hartford Arms. Check in Thursday evening after the session, check out Sunday morning."

"What about the equipment demonstration?" The third advertising man leaned forward, his tone carrying more interest than anything else discussed so far. "I heard there's going to be some kind of technical showcase. New technology or something along those lines."

"That's part of why we're sending our technical staff," Boucher interjected from his position at the head of the table. "The symposium has several equipment manufacturers presenting their latest innovations. Good opportunity to evaluate what's available before committing to any major purchases."

Vox processed this as background noise, the kind of conversation that happened around him rather than involving him. Margaret was nodding along, making notes in her careful handwriting. The advertising people seemed invested in these details for reasons Vox couldn't be bothered to understand. Something about a broadcasting symposium, travel arrangements, people going to Hartford for some kind of industry event.

None of it concerned him directly, so he let it wash over him without retention.

His thoughts drifted instead to Sterling's reaction after last night's broadcast. The station manager hadn't said anything directly, had maintained his usual gruff distance. But Vox had caught the small nods of approval during the broadcast, had noticed Sterling's posture relaxing as each segment concluded without incident. Had seen him make notes that looked positive rather than critical, underlining passages instead of crossing them out.

Sterling had liked it. Obviously he'd liked it, even if he was too proud or too committed to maintaining authority to actually say so. How could he not like it? Vox had more experience in television than television had existed at this point in time. He was literally the most qualified person on Earth for broadcast journalism, even if nobody knew why.

The thought made him smile, the expression small but genuine. Now *that* was something. That was power, even if it was power he couldn't openly claim or use directly. Knowledge that he possessed capabilities beyond anyone else's, expertise that wouldn't be common for decades.

But it was also a double edged sword. How could he leverage this advantage when he couldn't explain its source? He couldn't exactly tell people he'd spent decades as a media overlord in Hell, mastering technologies that hadn't been invented yet in this timeline. All he could do was demonstrate competence and hope people recognized it without requiring explanations for how he'd acquired such skills.

He'd have to be strategic about it though. Show enough knowledge to be impressive but not so much that people started asking uncomfortable questions about his educational background and training history. Walk the line between competent and suspiciously over qualified.

Someone across the table was addressing him directly. Vox blinked, his attention snapping back to the present.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"I said I caught your broadcast last night. The evening news." The man smiled, his expression friendly and genuine. He was younger than the other advertising executives, maybe early thirties, with an eager quality that suggested he was still new enough to the industry to be impressed by things. "Really well done. Very professional delivery."

"Oh. Thank you, I appreciate that." Vox manufactured appropriate modesty, the response automatic.

The acknowledgment felt strange, weirdly desensitizing in ways he couldn't quite articulate. Being on television in his original human life had felt massive, a genuine accomplishment worth celebrating. The first time he'd appeared on screen, young and nervous and overwhelmed by the significance of being broadcast to thousands of people simultaneously. He'd called his mother afterwards, voice shaking with excitement.

Now it almost felt like a demotion. Actually, not almost. It *was* a demotion. He'd gone from being the voice that shaped how millions of souls understood their reality, to reading prepared copy for a regional news station that maybe fifty thousand people watched on a good night.

The gap between those two positions was so vast it almost made him laugh. But laughing would require explaining the joke, so he just accepted the compliment with manufactured grace and turned his attention back to pretending to listen.

"The demographic breakdown for evening programming shows a significant skew toward the forty to sixty age bracket," one of the advertising men was explaining, gesturing at charts spread across the table. "Which means our messaging needs to account for that audience's specific concerns and purchasing patterns."

Margaret had started to respond, her voice carrying clearly. "Actually, if you look at the data from the past six months, there's been a notable shift toward younger listeners in the seven to nine evening slot, particularly..."

The advertising man simply started talking over her, his volume rising to drown out her words. "The traditional demographic assumptions still hold for the majority of our programming. We shouldn't overreact to short term fluctuations in the data."

Margaret stopped mid sentence, her expression flickering with frustration before settling into professional neutrality. Her pen stilled on her notepad, the point resting against paper without writing. Her jaw tightened fractionally, visible only because Vox was sitting close enough to notice.

This had already happened half a dozen times. The pattern was so predictable it was almost boring. Almost, except that watching it happen to someone he needed to maintain good relations with meant he occasionally had to intervene.

Vox leaned forward slightly, his voice cutting across the advertising man's continued rambling with authority. "Actually, Margaret's observation about the demographic shift is directly relevant to what you're discussing. The data she's referencing shows clear patterns in listening habits that would significantly affect your advertising strategy, particularly for products targeting that younger demographic."

He continued building on what Margaret had been saying before the interruption, adding technical details about audience measurement and engagement metrics. Not claiming her ideas as his own, but amplifying them, forcing the room to pay attention by virtue of his voice carrying weight hers didn't, talking over them the way they talked over Margaret.

Margaret shot him a grateful look, her expression warm with appreciation. She mouthed "thank you" when the advertising men's attention had shifted back to their papers.

The meeting droned on. Someone was discussing print advertising coordination, cross promotion opportunities between the radio and television stations. Vox's mind wandered again, tracking through the room's ambient sounds without processing their meaning.

Then his ears caught something. Footsteps in the hallway outside the closed door, accompanied by voices. Multiple people approaching, their conversation audible through the wood in fragments.

"...technical specifications need to be submitted by Tuesday at the latest, otherwise you won't have time to..." A female voice, professional and slightly harried. Barbara.

"That shouldn't be a problem." That voice made Vox's attention sharpen immediately. Alastor was out there, talking to Barbara about something.

Vox realized he'd stopped breathing, his body going completely still while he tracked their progress past the conference room door. The footsteps continued without pausing, their voices gradually fading as they moved further down the hallway toward whatever destination they were headed.

He released his breath slowly, trying to make the exhalation quiet enough that nobody would notice. His hands had tightened on the arms of his chair without him realizing.

Why had he hoped they'd stop? Why had some part of him expected Alastor to open this door and interrupt the meeting? That made no sense. Alastor had no reason to know Vox was here, no reason to care about this particular business meeting.

But the disappointment sat heavy in his chest anyway, irrational and unwelcome.

The thought surfaced unbidden before he could stop it. Was Barbara to Alastor what Margaret was to him? Some kind of social cover, a convenient relationship that provided respectability and deflected questions about personal life?

Vox tried to imagine Alastor stringing someone along the same way he was doing with Margaret but couldn't form a coherent image. The man was too particular, too unwilling to tolerate extended close contact with people he didn't genuinely want near him. The idea of him sustaining the kind of performance required for a fake romantic relationship seemed impossible.

And Barbara was thoroughly unimpressive anyway. Competent at her job certainly, organized and efficient in ways that made her valuable as an assistant. But bland and unremarkable. She faded into backgrounds rather than commanding attention. She had no spark, no edge, nothing that would actually interest someone like Alastor if he was choosing based on genuine preference rather than strategic necessity.

Not like Vox, who understood Alastor in ways Barbara never could. Who knew what he was, what he was capable of, what he would become given the right tools and opportunities.

One of the advertising men was leaning forward now, his expression carrying the particular excitement of someone about to make what they thought was a brilliant suggestion. "You know, I've been listening to that evening program, the one with all the jazz music. Real quality stuff. But I've never actually met the host. Just heard his voice on the radio."

"Alastor?" Boucher's tone was neutral, carefully uninvested.

"That's the one. He has a remarkable voice. It's very distinctive. Professional quality beyond what you usually hear on regional stations." The advertising man looked around the table, gathering support. "How many of you have actually seen him in person?"

Two hands went up hesitantly. The others shook their heads or shrugged.

"There you go! Jonathan, would you mind bringing him in? Just for a few minutes. Let us meet the talent, put a face to the voice. It would be fascinating to see how he compares to the persona he projects on air."

Several others voiced agreement immediately, their enthusiasm building off each other like a chain reaction. The idea had captured the room's imagination, transforming from one man's casual suggestion to group expectation in the space of seconds.

"I've always wondered if radio personalities actually talk like that in their every day lives," another man added, his tone carrying that particular curiosity people developed about celebrities they'd never seen.

Vox felt something twist in his stomach, sudden and visceral. The sensation was physical and immediate and completely unwelcome.

The air in the room seemed too warm, too thick, like he couldn't get enough oxygen despite breathing normally. His pulse had picked up, hammering against his ribs in a rhythm that felt too fast.

"I'm sure he's quite busy," Margaret offered diplomatically, her voice cutting through the building excitement. "He probably has preparations for upcoming broadcasts. We shouldn't interrupt his work just to satisfy our curiosity."

"Oh come on," another advertiser pressed, waving off her concern with a casual hand gesture. "Just five minutes. We've been cooped up in this room for hours discussing rates and demographics. A little break would do everyone good, and we'd appreciate the chance to meet him. It's not every day you get to interact with genuine radio talent."

"It would be a nice addition to the day," the younger advertising man agreed. "Something more interesting."

The discomfort in Vox's stomach intensified, spreading up into his chest. It felt wrong. Deeply, fundamentally wrong in ways that made Vox want to object but he couldn't articulate why. These were just business people wanting to meet a celebrity they'd heard on the radio. Perfectly normal curiosity, the kind of thing that happened all the time in this industry.

His reaction was blown out of proportion. Alastor could handle himself perfectly well in social situations. Would probably charm these advertising executives effortlessly, make them fall over themselves praising his sophistication and wit.

But Vox still didn't want him in this room.

Boucher was already standing, apparently resigned to fulfilling this request despite his own obvious reluctance showing in the way he moved slowly, like a man walking toward an unpleasant task. "I'll see if he's available. He may decline. He's not required to make appearances for visiting advertisers, but I can certainly ask."

"I'll get him," Vox said suddenly, the words emerging before he'd consciously decided to speak.

Chapter 46

Everyone turned to look at him. Margaret's expression showed confusion mixed with concern, her eyebrows drawing together, as if trying to figure out what he was thinking. The advertising men looked mildly surprised that the television guy was volunteering for what was essentially errand duty.

Vox glanced at Margaret. "With Margaret. I should show her some of the technical areas while we're looking for him."

The excuse was transparent and made no sense under any serious scrutiny. Margaret had no reason to need information about radio equipment specifications, and certainly didn't need a personal escort to look at broadcasting equipment.

But delivered with enough confidence, most lies could pass initial inspection.

Margaret looked thoroughly confused but stood anyway, gathering her things with quick movements. Her notepad and pen disappeared into her purse, her chair pushed in neatly. "Alright. Though I'm not sure..."

"I'll explain on the way." Vox was already moving toward the door, one hand gesturing for her to follow.

Boucher settled back into his chair, apparently relieved to not have to personally fetch his star talent. "Sure, Whittman. Bring him back if he's agreeable to the interruption."

The advertising men had already returned to their discussion, pulling out more spreadsheets and charts. One of them was droning on about projected market increase in the Northeast corridor.

Vox and Margaret left the conference room, the door closing behind them with a soft click. The hallway was significantly cooler than the meeting room, the air circulation better. Vox took a breath that felt cleaner, less stifling.

"That was thoughtful of you," Margaret said after a moment of walking in silence. Her voice was quiet, meant just for him. "Getting me out of there. Those men were starting to drive me mad."

Vox found himself saying something honest before he could stop it. "I didn't want to leave you there alone."

The realization hit him as he spoke. He genuinely hadn't wanted to abandon Margaret to those dismissive advertising executives, even though the root motivation wasn't love or romantic devotion or any of the things a proper boyfriend should feel. It was manipulation, pure and simple. He was maintaining a useful relationship through strategic consideration of her comfort.

But he'd still taken her feelings into account. Had still acted to prevent her discomfort, even if the underlying reason was selfish. That had to count for something, right? Some kind of progress in the strange project of becoming a better person that apparently heaven was monitoring?

The thought felt slippery and uncomfortable. He pushed it away.

Margaret's entire face softened, something warm and genuine flooding her expression. "That's very sweet of you, Vincent."

She moved closer, her arm threading through his with practiced ease. Her hand rested in the crook of his elbow, fingers curling slightly against his jacket sleeve, marking territory, even if she didn't consciously realize it.

Margaret started asking about the station's layout as they walked, her curiosity genuine. She commented on the architectural details, the way the hallways were organized with surprising

efficiency. "I imagine it must be quite complex, coordinating all these different departments. Do the radio and television divisions share much infrastructure?"

Vox answered her questions with more detail than he'd intended, his responses revealing familiarity with the building that he theoretically shouldn't possess. He knew which hallway led to the broadcast booths without checking signs, knew that the technical equipment rooms were on the second floor's east wing, mentioned the recording studios on three without thinking.

"You certainly know this place well," Margaret observed, her tone shifting slightly toward amusement. There was something playful in it, almost teasing. "Do you come here often?"

Vox felt sweat prickle at his hairline despite the cool air. "Sometimes. Technical consultation on equipment upgrades, that sort of thing."

The lie came smoothly but his heart rate had picked up anyway. Margaret accepted the explanation with a small nod, apparently satisfied, squeezing his arm gently.

They turned right into another hallway and nearly collided with two people coming from the opposite direction.

Alastor and Barbara, apparently returning from wherever they'd been headed earlier. They stopped short, the near collision forcing everyone to pause. The hallway wasn't particularly narrow but four people suddenly occupying the same space created awkward proximity.

"Oh! Good afternoon!" Margaret smiled with genuine warmth, her voice brightening immediately.

"Good afternoon to you as well." Barbara's smile was polite and practiced, her posture relaxed. "Do you two need directions?"

Her tone suggested she assumed they were lost, but was too professional to point it out directly.

Alastor's eyes found Vox immediately, tracking over his face. His expression shifted into something faintly amused and unmistakably questioning, eyebrows lifting as his gaze flicked briefly and pointedly to Margaret before returning to him.

The look carried a quiet inquiry into Vox's presence and his choice of company.

Vox ignored the look, deliberately breaking eye contact to glance down the hallway. He cleared his throat, tightening his hold on Margaret's arm slightly. "We were just looking around the station. Getting familiar with how the radio side operates."

"We were actually looking for you," Margaret added helpfully, her smile widening.

Vox resisted the urge to physically stop her from talking, his fingers twitching against her arm.

Alastor and Barbara exchanged a glance, some wordless communication passing between them. Barbara's eyebrows rose fractionally. Alastor's mouth tightened almost imperceptibly at the corners, his smile becoming more fixed.

"And why is that?" Alastor's tone was carefully neutral, his smile frozen in place. But something in his posture had shifted, subtle tension creeping into his shoulders.

Vox absolutely did not want to bring Alastor back to that conference room. Didn't want him subjected to being stared at by advertising executives who had no appreciation for what they'd be observing. The instinct to keep him away from that indignity was strong and immediate, flooding through Vox's chest with uncomfortable intensity.

But he couldn't explain that. Couldn't articulate why the thought made him want to physically block the hallway.

So instead he reached for a different excuse, something that would derail the entire conversation. "Margaret has never seen professional radio operations up close. I thought perhaps you could show us around. The broadcast booth, the technical areas."

Margaret looked confused, her head tilting slightly. "But didn't we need to..."

Vox's hand moved to her shoulder, the gesture was gentle but stopped her mid sentence. He angled his body slightly toward her, his smile charming and warm. The expression he'd perfected over countless business meetings. "That can wait. We've already done our part with the presentations. The rest is just networking. Why spend the time listening to them when we could be learning something interesting together?"

He tried making it sound like spending time with her was the priority. Like he'd orchestrated this entire detour specifically to give them time alone.

Margaret smiled, a slight blush coloring her cheeks. Her fingers tightened on his arm. "That does sound more pleasant than another hour spent in that room."

Alastor's smile remained fixed but his eyebrows drew together and rose simultaneously, creating an expression that made his smile look like a condescending grimace. The visible reaction of someone confronted with public romantic display that they found distasteful.

The reaction was immediate and transparent, at least to Vox who'd spent too long studying Alastor's expressions to miss anything.

Vox almost laughed. Alastor really did wear his feelings on his face so much more than he had in hell. The theatrical masks he maintained here were more transparent, easier to read. Every flicker of distaste or annoyance played out across his features plainly, if you paid enough attention. But Vox noticed everything. And with Alastor the observation felt less like strategic advantage and more like something else entirely.

The thought formed suddenly, hitting him with unexpected force. He knew Alastor better than anyone else possibly could in this timeline. Better than Boucher, who employed him. Better than Barbara, who worked with him daily. Better than any of the casual acquaintances Alastor maintained within his carefully curated social circles.

Vox had known Alastor for decades. He had studied him as a rival, cataloged his patterns and preferences with the kind of meticulous attention most people reserved for religious texts.

He had known Alastor longer than anyone else in the world, longer even than Alastor's own mother had known him. The realization sent a bright surge of energy through him that had nothing to do with strategy or advantage. This was personal triumph, the quiet satisfaction of occupying a position no one else could match.

It pleased him more than the moment he had realized he possessed more television experience than anyone else on earth. That had been professional satisfaction. This felt more significant somehow, more intimate, in a way that unsettled him even as he savored it.

He took a step back and gestured down the hallway with his free hand. "So what do you say, Al? Could you spare twenty minutes to show us how professional radio actually operates?"

The nickname emerged without conscious thought, casualness that assumed familiarity he had no right to claim.

Alastor's eyes narrowed at the nickname, his smile tightening at the corners. His entire body language shifted subtly, shoulders pulling back in a way that created more physical distance without actually moving. The posture of someone who'd just had a boundary crossed reasserting control of their personal space through body language alone.

But he didn't verbally object or point out the presumption. Just let the displeasure show in his expression, a silent rebuke that was somehow worse than actual criticism.

Barbara sighed softly, the sound carrying resignation mixed with something that might have been amusement. "I suppose we could spare twenty minutes or so."

She glanced at Alastor, waiting for confirmation. Some unspoken communication passed between them. Barbara's raised eyebrow asking *are we really doing this* and Alastor's minute shrug responding *apparently so.*

Alastor turned smoothly. "Very well. Follow me. And please do keep your voices down once we enter the technical areas. The afternoon programming is already in session."

He started walking, his pace measured and unhurried, Barbara falling into step beside him.

Vox and Margaret followed a few steps behind, Margaret's arm still looped through his.

They passed several offices, their doors closed or partially open. Through one doorway Vox caught a glimpse of someone hunched over a typewriter, fingers flying across the keys. Another office showed two people engaged in animated discussion, their hands gesturing emphatically.

The hallway ended at a heavy door marked "Technical Operations. Authorized Personnel Only."

Alastor produced a key from his pocket, unlocking it. The door swung inward, revealing a staircase leading up. The walls were plain concrete, the steps metal grating that would echo with each footfall.

"The broadcast booth is on the third floor," Alastor explained, his voice carrying that particular cadence he used when delivering information he'd repeated countless times. "Elevated position provides better signal propagation, reduces interference from ground level electrical systems."

They climbed in single file, footsteps echoing metallically against the walls. The sound was rhythmic, almost musical.

Vox found himself watching the back of Alastor's head as they climbed, tracking the movement of his shoulders, the precise placement of each step.

The third floor opened into a narrow hallway with several doors, each labeled with neat brass plaques.

Barbara had taken over the explanation at some point, her voice carrying professionally as she described the various technical departments. "Studio A is our primary broadcast location. Studio B handles pre recorded segments and special programming. Master Control coordinates all signal routing and manages our emergency backup systems."

Margaret had somehow drifted forward during the climb, walking alongside Barbara now. She asked questions about the station's operations with genuine interest, her notebook appearing from her purse as she jotted down details.

"How do you coordinate between live broadcasts and pre recorded content?" Margaret was asking. "Is there a master schedule that everyone follows?"

"Exactly right," Barbara replied warmly. "We maintain detailed programming schedules updated daily. The master control operator ensures smooth transitions between segments."

The two of them had clearly hit it off, finding common ground in their shared interest in organizational systems and professional competence. They'd moved to examining a schedule board mounted on the wall, Margaret asking questions about time management while Barbara explained the station's workflow optimization.

Which left Vox and Alastor at the back, trailing several steps behind the women.

The silence between them felt charged somehow, weighted with unspoken things. Vox could feel Alastor's presence beside him like static electricity, that particular awareness that made his skin prickle.

Alastor glanced over at him, his expression carrying that same questioning amusement from earlier. His eyebrow arched in silent inquiry.

Vox made a small gesture with his hand, fingers spreading slightly, a silent, *what is it?*

Alastor's eyebrows rose higher, his gaze flicking toward Margaret ahead of them. The look was pointed, clearly asking what exactly Vox was doing here with her in tow, playing tour guide at a radio station.

Vox leaned over slightly, dropping his voice to a murmur that wouldn't carry to the women ahead. "Have you never had a girlfriend before? They're terribly clingy. Can't go anywhere without wanting to tag along. She absolutely has to follow me everywhere I go."

The complaint was delivered with theatrical exasperation, playing up the exhausted boyfriend role.

Alastor's mouth twitched, something that might have been amusement flickering across his features. "I see. How inconvenient for you."

His tone was completely flat, suggesting he found Vox's performance transparent and mildly entertaining.

"You have no idea." Vox kept his voice light, conspiratorial. "Constant need for attention and validation. Very demanding."

"Mm." Alastor's response was noncommittal but his eyes held a glimmer of something that looked almost playful. "One wonders how you manage to bear such a burden."

"It's a trial," Vox agreed solemnly. "But someone has to make the sacrifice."

They continued walking, the comfortable silence between them feeling oddly natural now. The tension from earlier had dissipated into something lighter, easier.

Ahead, Barbara was explaining something about recording equipment to Margaret, who was nodding along enthusiastically. Their conversation had shifted to cataloging systems, both women apparently fascinated by the technical details of archival organization.

"...and this is where we archive the recordings," Barbara was saying, gesturing to a door on their right. "Everything gets catalogued by date and program type for easy retrieval. We maintain copies going back five years. We're actually prepping some of these for the Hartford symposium next week, so they'll be on display there."

Margaret turned back suddenly, her attention shifting from Barbara to Alastor. Her expression brightened with genuine interest. "Oh! Are you going to Hartford?"

Alastor's smile widened slightly, showing professional enthusiasm. "Yes, that's correct. I'll be there the whole time, Thursday through Sunday."

Vox's head snapped around so fast something in his neck cracked audibly. "Wait, what? Where are you going?"

The question came out sharper than intended, too much genuine surprise bleeding through.

Alastor continued walking, apparently not hearing the question. Or pretending not to hear it, which seemed more likely given the small smile playing at his lips.

"Hey." Vox's voice rose slightly, losing the casual tone entirely. "Where are you going?"

"I just said. Hartford." Alastor's tone was maddeningly casual, like he was discussing the weather.

"For what?" Vox was aware he sounded petulant but couldn't quite stop himself.

"The symposium. The one that was probably being discussed at length in the meeting you were supposedly attending."

Vox felt something twist in his chest, an uncomfortable sensation that might have been panic. He'd tuned out most of that meeting, hadn't been paying attention to the logistics discussion. "What symposium? When?"

"This coming week. Thursday through Sunday, as I just mentioned." Alastor glanced back at him, his expression carrying faint amusement at Vox's obvious agitation. "Were you not listening?"

"I was listening." The lie was automatic. "I just didn't realize you were the one going."

"And who else would represent the station at a broadcasting symposium?"

"I don't know. Barbara?"

"Barbara is accompanying me to handle administrative coordination, yes."

The information hit Vox like cold water.

"Why?" The question came out more demanding than Vox intended, almost accusatory.

Alastor stopped walking, turning to face him fully. His eyebrows rose like he found Vox's reaction puzzling and slightly inappropriate. "What's it to you?"

Vox opened his mouth, then closed it. He had no good answer to that question. Why did he care where Alastor was going?

They stared at each other for a long moment. Behind them, Barbara and Margaret's conversation continued, something about filing systems and cross referencing methods.

"I'm just..." Vox scrambled for an explanation that wouldn't sound completely unhinged. "Curious. About the symposium. What it entails."

"Technical demonstrations, panel discussions, networking opportunities with other regional broadcasters." Alastor listed these off with the tone of someone reciting information he'd already explained multiple times. "Standard industry event. Rather tedious but professionally necessary."

"Right. Of course." Vox tried to make his voice sound normal, disinterested, failing completely. "And you're going alone?"

"As I said, Barbara will be accompanying me to handle administrative coordination."

Something about that statement made Vox's jaw tighten involuntarily. "Just the two of you?"

"And several others from the station's technical staff, yes." Alastor's amusement was growing more visible now, his smile taking on a quality that suggested he was enjoying Vox's increasingly poor attempt at hiding his reaction. "Why all the questions, Vincent?"

"No reason. Just making conversation."

"Mm."

They'd reached the broadcast booth now. Barbara was explaining something to Margaret about soundproofing, her hands gesturing at the walls. Margaret looked fascinated, asking

follow up questions with genuine interest.

Vox barely registered any of it. His mind was stuck on the Hartford symposium.

The thought was infuriating for reasons he couldn't articulate.

"You know," Vox said suddenly, the words coming out before he'd fully thought them through. "I have technical expertise that might be valuable at a symposium like that. Television and radio technologies are increasingly interconnected. Cross pollination of ideas and all that."

Alastor turned to look at him, his expression shifting into something more assessing. "Are you suggesting you should attend?"

"I'm suggesting it might be beneficial. For both stations. Coordination between our technical departments could lead to innovations that benefit everyone."

"How fascinating." Alastor's tone was completely flat. "And this sudden interest in inter departmental coordination has nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that I'll be there?"

"Of course not. That would be absurd." Vox kept his voice steady, professional. "This is purely about professional development and technical knowledge sharing."

"Naturally."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Alastor's expression remained pleasant but something in his eyes suggested he saw right through Vox's transparent excuse.

Ahead, Barbara and Margaret had moved into the broadcast booth itself, their voices carrying back in fragments as Barbara explained the equipment setup. Something about microphone placement and acoustic optimization.

"Besides," Vox added, trying a different angle. "Margaret mentioned the advertising people want more coordination between the stations. What better opportunity than a symposium specifically designed for that kind of networking?"

"The symposium is for broadcasting professionals, not advertising staff."

"But I'm not advertising staff. I'm technical staff. Who does broadcasts. And advertising sometimes." Vox was grasping now, his arguments getting progressively weaker.

Alastor's smile had transformed into something that looked almost pitying. "You're remarkably persistent when you want something."

"I prefer the term 'thorough.'"

"I'm sure you do."

Barbara's voice called back to them, interrupting whatever Alastor might have said next. "Are you two coming in or are you going to stand in the hallway all afternoon?"

Alastor turned away, moving toward the booth. "Coming."

Vox followed, his mind still churning through possibilities. There had to be a way to insert himself into this Hartford trip. Some angle he could work, some justification he could manufacture that would make his presence necessary rather than just transparently desperate.

The broadcast booth was impressive, he'd admit that much. Banks of equipment lined the walls, tubes glowing amber behind protective grilles. The mixing board was more sophisticated than what they had at the television station, with more channels and finer control over signal routing.

Margaret was examining a microphone with careful interest, listening to Barbara explain the technical specifications. Her enthusiasm seemed genuine, not performed for social benefit.

"This is fascinating," Margaret was saying. "I had no idea there was this much complexity involved. It seems so simple when you're just listening to the radio."

"That's the goal," Barbara replied warmly. "All this technical infrastructure should be invisible to the listener. They should just hear the program, not think about how it's being delivered."

They moved to examining a filing system near the back of the booth, Margaret asking questions about cataloging methods while Barbara explained the station's archival procedures with obvious enthusiasm.

Which left Vox and Alastor standing near the mixing board, ostensibly admiring the equipment but actually just existing in slightly awkward proximity.

"Hartford is quite nice this time of year," Vox offered after a moment of silence. "I've heard."

"Have you now."

"Yes. Supposedly this is the best season to visit. Good weather for walking around the city between sessions."

"I doubt there will be much time for tourism. The schedule is quite packed."

"Still. It would be pleasant to see a different city. Get out of the usual routine."

Alastor turned to look at him directly, his expression shifting into something more serious. "Vincent. You're not coming to Hartford."

"I didn't say I was."

"You've been dropping increasingly obvious hints for the past ten minutes. It's not subtle."

Vox felt his face heat slightly. "I was just expressing general interest in professional development opportunities."

"You were being obvious about wanting to accompany me on a business trip for reasons you seem unable or unwilling to articulate."

"I just thought..."

"What did you think?" Alastor's tone was direct, cutting through Vox's attempted deflections. "That you could simply invite yourself along to a symposium you have no legitimate reason to attend?"

Vox opened his mouth to argue, then closed it. Alastor was right. He had no good justification or legitimate professional reason. Just the increasingly uncomfortable awareness that he didn't want Alastor going somewhere he couldn't follow.

Which was insane. And exactly the kind of behavior Alastor had already called obsessive.

"You're right," Vox said finally. "That was presumptuous of me."

Alastor's expression sharpened fractionally. "The symposium truly is quite tedious. Hours of technical presentations and forced networking with other broadcasters. You'd be bored within the first hour."

"Probably."

"And you have your own responsibilities here. Sterling would hardly appreciate you abandoning your duties to attend an event that doesn't concern your department."

"True."

They stood in silence for another moment. Across the room, Barbara and Margaret were laughing about something, their conversation flowing easily.

"Though," Alastor said slowly, as if the thought was just occurring to him. "I suppose if Sterling could be convinced that cross station technical coordination was valuable enough to justify your attendance, and if you were willing to handle your own accommodations and travel arrangements, it wouldn't be entirely unreasonable for you to make an appearance at some of the public sessions."

Vox's head snapped up. "Really?"

"I said it wouldn't be entirely unreasonable. I didn't say it was a good idea." Alastor's smile had returned, seemingly aware he was being manipulated but found it amusing enough to allow. "But if you were to attend on your own initiative, as a representative of the television station, I couldn't very well prevent you from being in the same city at the same time."

"I'll speak to Sterling first thing Monday morning."

"I'm sure you will." Alastor turned back toward the equipment, effectively ending the conversation. But something in his posture seemed less tense than before, his shoulders relaxing slightly.

Vox felt absurdly pleased with himself, a grin spreading across his face that he had to work to suppress. The energy from earlier returned, that bright feeling of victory.

Four days in Hartford with Alastor. For professional development purposes, naturally.

He couldn't wait.

Chapter 47

The door closed behind them with a soft click.

The hallway felt suddenly quieter, the absence of voices leaving a vacuum that pressed against Alastor's eardrums. He could still hear their footsteps receding down the corridor, the soft murmur of conversation as Vincent said something that made Margaret laugh. A bright sound, genuine and unforced.

Barbara remained behind with him in the broadcast booth, already moving toward the filing cabinets they'd disturbed during the impromptu tour. Her hands were efficient as always, straightening papers that had been pulled out for demonstration, realigning folders that had been shifted.

Alastor moved to the mixing board without comment, his fingers finding the channel controls that had been adjusted during Barbara's explanation. He returned them to their proper positions with practiced precision, muscle memory guiding each movement. Someone would be using this equipment within the hour and any deviation from standard settings might cause problems.

The ritual of restoration was soothing.

"Well," Barbara said, her tone carrying that particular brightness that meant she was about to share opinions. "Margaret seems lovely. She's very sharp and attentive. Asked excellent questions about our archival systems. I told her she should come back sometime, I'd show her more of our cataloging methods."

Alastor hummed, adjusting another dial, watching the needle settle into proper alignment.

"And she's clearly quite taken with the weatherman." Barbara was reorganizing the stack of recording logs now, her movements brisk. "Though I have to say, he is rather peculiar, isn't he?"

Alastor made another noncommittal sound, his attention apparently fixed on the equipment.

"I don't mean to be uncharitable," Barbara continued, warming to her subject. "But there's something distinctly off about that man. The way he inserted himself into our afternoon, dragging poor Margaret around. And that business with the nickname." She shook her head, her disapproval evident. "Extremely unprofessional. You've known him for what, a few months? Less? And he's already taking liberties like you're old friends."

"Some people are naturally familiar." Alastor's tone remained neutral.

"Familiar is one thing. That was presumptuous." Barbara had moved to the microphone stands now, adjusting them back to their standard positions. "And the questions about Hartford. Good heavens."

Alastor's hands stilled on the mixing board for just a moment before resuming their work.

"Though I suppose he's harmless enough," Barbara added, her tone shifting toward dismissal. "Just annoying. He seems to think enthusiasm compensates for boundaries. From what I've heard, Sterling certainly seems to find him useful at least."

Something cold settled in Alastor's chest.

The word *harmless* sat wrong, like fabric cut against the grain.

Barbara was still talking, seemingly working through thoughts aloud. "And honestly, having him at Hartford might not be the worst thing. He'd probably keep some of the more tedious networking people occupied. You know how they get at these conferences, always trying to corner you for advice or introductions. At least Vincent would draw their attention instead."

She wasn't wrong about that part. Vincent was loud, technically aggressive in conversation, the kind of presence that demanded engagement. People would orbit him naturally, find his obvious enthusiasm more accessible than Alastor's careful distance. At least Alastor hoped so.

"The hotel confirmed the room arrangements this morning," Barbara continued, moving to straighten a stack of scripts. "They're doing their usual cost saving measures. Shared accommodations for technical staff, single rooms only for senior personnel. I told them we'd need two rooms minimum, possibly three depending on final attendance."

Alastor's attention sharpened fractionally. "Two should be sufficient."

"That's what I figured. Though if Vincent does convince Sterling to send him, we might need to adjust. These smaller conferences always have limited availability." Barbara glanced at her watch. "Speaking of which, I should confirm the final arrangements. I'll need your presentation materials by Tuesday at the latest for the equipment demonstration."

"They're already prepared."

"Of course they are." Barbara smiled, genuine fondness in her expression. "I'll leave you to finish up here then. The afternoon broadcast starts in thirty minutes."

She left, her footsteps fading down the hallway.

Alastor remained in the booth, his hands resting on the mixing board. The space was quiet now, properly ordered, everything in its correct place.

His fingers drummed once against the metal casing of the mixing board, the sound sharp in the empty room.

Barbara's instincts were good as ever. Her irritation with Vincent mirrored his own surface reactions, the social inappropriateness, the transparent petulance, the presumptuous

familiarity. She saw what anyone with basic observational skills would see.

But she'd called him harmless, and that was where her assessment failed completely.

Few days ago, Boucher had knocked on his office door.

He hadn't opened it or stuck his head in with the casual authority of someone who owned the building and everything in it. He knocked three times, measured and polite, waiting for permission to enter.

Alastor had looked up from the broadcast script he'd been annotating, his pen stilling mid note. "Come in."

The door opened and Boucher entered with the careful posture of someone entering someone else's space. He carried a coffee cup in one hand, the other adjusting his tie in a nervous gesture he probably didn't realize he made. "Do you have a moment? I wanted to discuss Hartford."

"Of course." Alastor set his pen down carefully, giving Boucher his full attention. The script could wait. "Please, sit."

Boucher sat in the chair across from Alastor's desk, the same chair that Barbara used during their morning coordination meetings, the same chair that visiting advertisers occupied when they wanted to discuss sponsorship opportunities. The guest chair, in the office of the station's star talent, in the building Boucher owned.

The irony was not lost on Alastor, and he suspected it wasn't lost on Boucher either.

"The symposium is coming up quickly," Boucher began, stirring his coffee. The spoon made small clinking sounds against the ceramic, a rhythmic accompaniment to his words. "I've been thinking about our representation, how we present ourselves to the other stations, the equipment manufacturers. Image matters at these events, you know how it is."

Alastor waited, his hands folded on the desk.

"I'm thinking we should bring someone from the television side." Boucher's tone was casual, offhanded in the way that meant he'd been thinking about this for a while. "Cross station coordination and all that. Good opportunity for the symposium organizers to see we're serious about integrated operations, about being forward thinking."

He glanced up, gauging the reaction, then added, almost as an afterthought, "Sterling's been pushing for it. He mentioned Whittman."

The name dropped into the room with deliberate nonchalance.

"Last time we met, Sterling was impressed by him," Boucher continued, filling the silence too quickly. "Says Vincent's energetic, has a natural knack for his work. Comes across well on camera, too. Thinks he'd make a good impression for the publicity photographs. Someone with the face sponsors would remember."

The suggestion hung in the air between them.

Alastor's response was immediate, the word emerging before Boucher had finished his thought. "No."

Boucher blinked, his coffee spoon stilling. "No?"

"Vincent Whittman is unsuitable for professional representation." Alastor's tone remained pleasant but something in it had hardened fractionally. "He's undisciplined, draws unnecessary attention to himself. Doesn't understand proper professional boundaries and would reflect poorly on the station's reputation at an industry event of this caliber."

The vehemence of his own response registered even as he spoke. The reaction that revealed more than it should.

Boucher's eyebrows rose slightly. "Those are rather strong words. I was just suggesting he might attend a few public sessions, not asking you to collaborate with him directly or share accommodations. Just having the television station represented, you know, showing a unified front."

"He's unsuitable," Alastor repeated, his voice controlled now, more professional. "The symposium requires a certain level of decorum, an understanding of industry protocols. Vincent lacks those qualities."

"Does he?" Boucher set his coffee down on the desk, his attention sharpening in a way that was uncomfortably direct. "Because from what I've observed, Vincent has been nothing but professional during the meetings I've attended with him. Enthusiastic, certainly, perhaps a bit overeager. But hardly inappropriate."

"You haven't worked with him directly."

"Neither have you, technically." Boucher leaned back in his chair, his posture becoming more assured, apparently deciding to push back. "Different stations, different supervisors, different areas of expertise. Sterling speaks very highly of his recent work, you know. And his technical knowledge is genuinely impressive, from what I've heard. You have to admit he knows his equipment."

Alastor said nothing, his expression remaining pleasant and attentive.

"I'm not trying to force the issue," Boucher continued, his tone growing slightly softer in that practiced way he had when he sensed resistance. "But I do think there's value in presenting a unified front at these conferences. Radio and television working together, sharing expertise, showing that we're adapting to changing markets. It's good optics, good for the station's reputation."

"Optics." Alastor let the word sit for a moment. "Is that what we're optimizing for?"

"Among other things." Boucher picked up his coffee again, took a careful sip. "Look, I trust your judgment. I always have, you know that. If you feel strongly that Vincent shouldn't attend, then we won't pursue it. But I'm curious about the resistance. What specifically concerns you? Is it just the aforementioned issues or is there something else?"

The question was phrased carefully, genuine inquiry without accusation. Boucher was good at that, navigating conversations with the delicacy of someone who'd learned when to press and when to retreat.

Alastor considered his options carefully, weighing what he could say without revealing too much. He could cite professional concerns, point to Vincent's relative inexperience with industry events, suggest that Hartford wasn't the appropriate venue for someone still establishing themselves in broadcasting. All reasonable objections that Boucher would likely accept.

"Vincent doesn't carry himself appropriately for someone in his position," Alastor said finally, choosing his words with precision. "He inserts himself into conversations and situations where he hasn't been invited, assumes familiarity that hasn't been earned. At an industry symposium, that kind of behavior would be particularly noticeable, particularly inappropriate. It would reflect on the entire station."

"I see." Boucher's fingers tapped against his coffee cup in a slow rhythm. "You're concerned about professional presentation."

"I'm concerned about maintaining the station's reputation for competence and discretion."

"That's fair." Boucher was quiet for a moment, his gaze drifting to the window, to the view of the city beyond. When he spoke again, his voice carried a different quality, something almost wistful. "You know, when I bought this station, people told me the most valuable asset would be the equipment. The transmitters, the recording technology, the broadcast infrastructure. All the physical machinery that makes everything work."

Alastor waited, sensing this was going somewhere.

"They were wrong." Boucher turned back to face him, his expression serious now. "The most important asset was you. Your talent, your audience connection, your instincts about what works and what doesn't. That's what makes this station competitive, what keeps us relevant. The equipment matters, certainly, but it's meaningless without someone who knows how to use it properly."

"I appreciate your faith in me."

"That's not the point." Boucher set his coffee down again, this time with finality. "I'm going to defer to your judgment on this. If you don't want Vincent at Hartford, then he won't attend. Simple as that. I'll tell Sterling the symposium is radio focused this year, no need for television representation."

The relief should have been immediate, should have settled over Alastor comfortably.

Instead, something else flickered through his mind, brief and uncomfortable. Vincent, unsupervised for four days. In the building, in the office, asking questions to people who wouldn't know to keep their mouths shut.

"Though," Boucher added, standing now, preparing to leave. "If you do change your mind, let me know. The offer stands. Sometimes the best way to understand someone's capabilities is to watch them in unfamiliar territory, see how they handle themselves when they can't rely on established routines."

He picked up his coffee and moved toward the door, pausing with his hand on the handle. "Also, Barbara mentioned the room situation. The hotel's doing their usual cost cutting measures, trying to maximize revenue during conference season. I told her we'd cover single rooms for senior staff but she should coordinate shared accommodations for anyone else we bring along. Keeps the budget reasonable without being cheap about it."

"That seems sensible."

"Good. I'll let you get back to your work." Boucher opened the door, then paused again. "Thank you for being candid with me about your concerns, Alastor. That kind of honesty is valuable, helps me make better decisions about how we present ourselves."

The door closed behind him with a soft click.

Alastor had sat in the silence of his office for several minutes after that, his hands resting on the desk, his mind working through implications.

He'd just been handed a choice. Either keep Vincent here, under watch but out of sight, or bring him to Hartford, contained but observable.

The decision had felt obvious in that moment. Keeping Vincent away and maintaining distance was the prudent way to go about this.

The memory faded, leaving Alastor alone in the broadcast booth with his reflection and his thoughts.

Vincent answered too quickly when presented with technical problems, spoke with certainty about technologies that were still theoretical, used terminology that felt slightly ahead of its time. He showed no hesitation, no uncertainty about his capabilities in ways that most people, even competent people, couldn't help but display when operating at the edge of their expertise. And he was building a weapon, called it that explicitly, with full awareness of what the word implied.

Alastor's grip tightened on the mixing board's edge, metal warm under his palms. He forced his fingers to relax, one by one, deliberate control reasserted.

If Vincent was dangerous, and the evidence increasingly suggested he might be, then what was the appropriate response?

He could still refuse Vincent's attendance at Hartford. Speak to Boucher again, be more explicit about his concerns, frame it as protecting the station's professional reputation, maintaining appropriate boundaries between department and Boucher would listen. The man would defer to his judgment, just like he always did.

And then Vincent would remain here, unsupervised for four days while Alastor was in another city.

The thought formed with uncomfortable clarity.

Leaving Vincent behind meant access to Alastor's office when it was empty, access to equipment rooms and technical specifications, access to conversations with station staff. Freedom to move unseen through spaces he shouldn't have access to, asking questions he shouldn't know to ask. No one would even notice he knew too much, because no one else knew enough.

Four days was enough time to do considerable damage if that was Vincent's intention.

Hartford solved these problems.

Neutral ground, no established routines or safe spaces, no allies or contacts Vincent could leverage, no privacy to conduct whatever investigations or preparations he might be planning. And most importantly, constant proximity. Alastor would know where Vincent was, who he spoke to, how he reacted to various stimuli.

It was containment disguised up as professional courtesy. Watching him in daylight was preferable to imagining what he might do in the dark, and once the thought took hold, the logic seemed clean, even inevitable.

Alastor's hands had returned to the mixing board, adjusting settings that didn't need adjustment, correcting alignments that were already correct. The movements were automatic, muscle memory filling the space while his mind worked through alternatives.

He could be wrong about Vincent entirely. Could be seeing patterns where none existed, reading threat into incompetence dressed up with confidence. The portable transmitter could be exactly what Vincent claimed, useful technology, nothing more sinister than professional ambition. The word weapon could have been hyperbole, dramatic language from someone who thought in theatrical terms.

It was possible.

Alastor gave the possibility approximately ten seconds of consideration before dismissing it outright. Vincent was dangerous, that much was certain. The only remaining questions were what kind of dangerous he was, and what he wanted. Hartford would answer both.

And there were secondary benefits, if he was being honest with himself about the calculation. The symposium would be filled with the usual crowd, middling executives trying to network their way up, technical staff showing off their knowledge like peacocks, everyone thinking that proximity to Alastor meant they'd somehow absorbed his expertise through osmosis. People would touch him without permission, would stand too close during conversations, would laugh too loudly at things he said that weren't meant to be funny.

It was exhausting.

If Vincent attended, Alastor could remain gracious and professional while Vincent absorbed the actual burden of interaction. He could maintain his public image without subjecting himself to painful small talk. It was a practical solution, the exact strategic use of resources that had served Alastor well throughout his career.

Rival engineers would be there, people from competing stations, from equipment manufacturers, from corporate offices evaluating regional talent for potential promotion. They would ask questions, probe for weaknesses, test boundaries. If Vincent reacted defensively or revealed information he shouldn't possess, Alastor would learn something valuable about exactly how dangerous he actually was. If Vincent didn't react, if he performed perfectly within expected parameters, Alastor would learn something else entirely.

Either way, Vincent would became a tool for gathering information about himself, which was pleasingly ironic.

The broadcast booth looked proper again now, everything returned to its correct configuration. Alastor ran his eyes over the space systematically, checking for any remaining signs of disruption. The faint scent of cologne that wasn't his own still lingered near the glass partition, a smudge where someone had leaned too close remained visible despite the ambient lighting being poor enough to hide it from most observers.

Small evidences of intrusion that would fade but hadn't yet.

Going to Hartford with Vincent wasn't indulgence. It was the only logical choice once all factors were properly weighed.

The afternoon broadcast would start soon. He should be reviewing his notes, preparing his voice, settling into the mental space required for performance. Instead he stood in the empty booth, looking at his own reflection in the smudged glass.

His reflection stared back at him, expression pleasant and controlled, revealing nothing.

Containment cut both ways, of course. Four days of watching Vincent meant four days of being watched in return, of having his own patterns observed, his reactions cataloged, his weaknesses identified. Vincent was too observant not to notice things, too intelligent not to draw conclusions.

The thought should have bothered him more than it did.

Alastor's expression didn't change, but something shifted behind his eyes, some small acknowledgment that he'd made a choice that felt less like strategy and more like stepping onto ice of uncertain thickness. But it's not like strategy had gotten him anywhere with Vincent.

The door closed behind him with a soft click, leaving the broadcast booth empty and properly ordered once again.

For now.

Chapter 48

The suitcase lay open on the Murphy bed like a mouth waiting to be fed.

Vox stood over it, holding a shirt he'd already folded three times trying to get the creases right, his attention split between the task at hand and the running commentary he was providing to his fishtank audience.

"Four days," he said to the guppies, who continued their eternal circuit with complete indifference to his excitement. "Four entire days in Hartford with nothing but networking opportunities and technical demonstrations and absolutely no weather maps to draw or Sterling breathing down my neck."

He set the shirt in the suitcase, immediately second guessing the placement. Should the shirts go on the bottom or the top? Did it matter? The mundane logistics of human travel felt simultaneously trivial and insurmountable.

"And Alastor will be there," Vox continued, pulling the shirt back out to refold it again. His hands moved with nervous energy that had nowhere else to go. "Just coincidentally. In the same city, attending the same symposium for four consecutive days and nights. What are the odds?"

The larger guppy surfaced briefly, gulping air before diving back down. The smaller one remained hidden behind the plastic plant, only its tail visible.

"I know what you're thinking," Vox said, pointing at the tank with the shirt still clutched in his other hand. "You're thinking this is obsessive behavior. That I'm reading too much into a professional conference that happens to include someone I have business dealings with. But you're wrong. This is strategic networking. This is me taking initiative to expand my technical knowledge base in ways that will benefit my career trajectory."

He paused, considering his own words, then laughed. The sound came out sharper than he intended, bouncing off the apartment's bare walls.

The shirt went back into the suitcase, this time staying there. He grabbed another from the small pile he'd laid out on the bed, starting the folding process again with marginally better technique.

"The thing is," he continued, his tone shifting into something more contemplative, "Hartford is going to be different. It's a neutral territory. There are no established routines or power dynamics. Just a bunch of broadcasting professionals discussing boring stuff. But I still need to be there."

He set down the second shirt, his hands stilling on the fabric. The words hung in the air for a moment.

"I'm being logical, aren't I?" The question was directed at his reflection in the fish tank glass, distorted and wavering through the water. "It makes sense when you think about it. Even if it's not something an average person would do."

The smaller guppy darted out from behind the plant, grabbed a piece of food floating near the surface, then retreated back to safety. The larger one watched this with predatory focus before resuming its patrol pattern.

"Then again," Vox said, his tone brightening again with renewed energy, "average people also don't have my particular combination of skills and knowledge. Average people aren't building revolutionary broadcast technology decades ahead of schedule. Average people haven't spent literal decades as media overlords in hell."

He grabbed a third shirt, his movements becoming more assured now that he'd worked through whatever emotional spiral had been threatening. "So maybe my behavior isn't obsessive. Maybe it's just operating on a level that looks strange to outside observers who don't have the full context. Maybe I'm actually being perfectly rational given my unique circumstances and objectives."

The fish offered no opinion on this self justification.

"Besides," Vox continued, warming to his theme, "this trip is going to be productive regardless of personal motivations. I'll meet other engineers, observe competing technologies, establish connections with equipment manufacturers who might be useful for future projects after I dispose of Alastor."

He paused in his packing, a sock dangling from his hand as a thought occurred to him.

"What if he doesn't actually want me there?" The question came out unsure, uncertainty bleeding through despite his best efforts to maintain confidence. "What if all that business about not being entirely unreasonable was just him trying to be polite?"

The larger guppy bumped against the glass, its mouth opening and closing in the eternal search for food.

"You're right," Vox said to it, his confidence rebuilding itself through sheer force of will. "Alastor is anything but polite. He suggested I attend. Well, he made it sound like a warning, but the point stands. He didn't have to mention it at all. Could have just let me continue thinking the symposium was closed to television staff and I never would have known otherwise."

The sock went into the suitcase, followed by its mate. Vox surveyed the contents critically, trying to remember what else he'd need for four days away. Toiletries, obviously. His better shoes, the ones without the worn heels. Enough shirts to appear professional without repeating outfits too obviously. The nice tie Margaret had complimented last month.

"And who knows," he said, reaching for his razor and shaving cream from the bathroom shelf, "maybe this will be the breakthrough moment."

He set the toiletries in the suitcase, then immediately pulled them back out to arrange them more efficiently. The shaving cream was too bulky, took up space that could be used for other things. Could he shave at the hotel instead? Did hotels provide razors? He genuinely couldn't remember the last time he'd been to a human hotel.

"Or," he continued, his tone shifting darker, "maybe I'll spend four days watching him charm everyone else while treating me like shit. That's also a possibility. A distinctly unpleasant possibility that I'm choosing not to think about because thinking about it would make me reconsider this entire trip."

The fish tank bubbled its constant rhythm, the only sound in the apartment besides Vox's voice and the occasional creak of the building settling around him.

"Alright," he said finally, straightening up and returning to his packing with renewed determination. "Enough about that. I have a suitcase to finish and a professional conference to prepare for. The personal complications can wait until I'm actually in Hartford dealing with them in real time."

The rest of the packing proceeded more efficiently, his hands moving through the familiar motions while his mind drifted to logistics. He'd need to confirm his train tickets, make sure he had enough cash for incidental expenses, perhaps review some of the technical literature about current broadcast standards so he didn't sound completely ignorant during the inevitable shop talk.

"I'll be gone for four days," he told the fish as he closed the suitcase with decisive finality. "Try not to die while I'm away. I know you guys have issues but you'll just have to work that out between yourselves like adults. Or like fish. Whatever applies in your situation."

He paused, his hand still resting on the closed suitcase, as the actual implication of that statement hit him.

"Wait." Vox turned to look at the tank, at the two guppies swimming their oblivious circles. "No. You will actually die. Four days without food is probably fine for fish your size, but knowing my luck you'd both be floating belly up by the time I got back."

The thought of returning from Hartford to find dead fish in stagnant water was unpleasant enough that he couldn't dismiss it. He needed someone to feed them while he was gone.

Vox walked over to the tank, staring at it while his mind catalogued potential options.

Margaret was the obvious choice on paper. She was reliable and would probably agree without complaint if he asked nicely. But the thought of letting her into his apartment made something uncomfortable twist in his chest. This space was private, sparse and shabby in ways that would reveal things about his actual financial situation that he'd rather keep obscured. The contrast between the flowers he'd bought her and the reality of how he actually lived would raise questions he didn't want to answer.

Plus he wasn't even certain she was coming to Hartford yet. Had assumed so based on her attendance at the planning meetings, but assumptions weren't reliable when it came to travel logistics. Better not to involve her if he could avoid it.

David was absolutely out of the question. The man was too observant, too intelligent, too likely to notice things in the apartment that would raise uncomfortable questions. A casual look around would identify the lack of personal effects, the complete absence of photographs or mementos, the suspicious emptiness of someone who'd appeared in this timeline fully formed without a past.

No. David could never set foot in here.

Vox's eyes drifted to the wall where, until recently, he'd been maintaining his investigative materials. The newspaper clippings about mysterious disappearances, the timeline he'd constructed of potential murders based on gaps in Alastor's public appearances, the map with pins marking locations where bodies might theoretically be disposed of.

Most of it had fallen down over the past few weeks, the cheap tape losing adhesion in the apartment's fluctuating humidity. Newspaper clippings had drifted to the floor in scattered piles. Pins had disappeared into the floorboards or under furniture. The whole operation had degraded from investigative board to garbage without Vox really noticing or caring enough to maintain it.

But some pieces remained. A few articles still clung stubbornly to the wall with their yellowing tape, some handwritten notes that would be extremely difficult to explain to anyone who happened to glance at them still pinned up.

Which brought him back to his original problem. He needed someone to feed the fish. Someone who wouldn't ask too many questions, wouldn't be curious enough to snoop through his belongings, wouldn't find it strange that Vincent Whittman lived like a ghost in his own apartment.

Mrs. Kowalski.

She was the only option that made sense. She lived right down the hall, had already demonstrated willingness to check on him when she thought he might be dying, wouldn't care enough about his living situation to draw conclusions from it, since her own apartment probably looked just as bad if not worse.

Vox sighed, looking at the bowl and tray from her soup delivery still sitting on his small kitchen counter. He'd completely forgotten to return them. Had meant to wash them and bring them back days ago, but instead let them sit there gathering dust.

He couldn't just show up at her door now and practically say, "hey, I ate the food you made when I was sick, here are your dishes back, also can you feed my fish while I'm gone for four days?" The transaction would be too one sided, too obviously him asking for favors without offering anything in return. Mrs. Kowalski had been practical about her soup delivery, had framed it as protecting property values, but that didn't mean he could lean on her generosity indefinitely without reciprocating.

He'd need to bring her something. Some kind of offering that would balance the scales, make the fish feeding request feel more like mutual exchange than one sided imposition.

But first, he needed to make this apartment look like something other than a crime scene in progress.

Vox moved to the wall where his investigative materials still clung stubbornly. He pulled down the remaining newspaper clippings carefully, trying not to tear the yellowing paper. Each article represented hours of work, cross referencing dates and locations, building patterns from incomplete information. Part of him wanted to keep them organized, maintain the timeline he'd constructed with such meticulous attention.

But practicality won out over sentimentality. He shuffled them into a pile, not bothering to preserve any particular order. The map came down next, pins removed and scattered into a small container he'd found under the sink. The handwritten notes, his own analysis of Alastor's potential methods and motivations, those got crumpled fastest of all.

The whole mess went into a shoebox he'd been using to store receipts and other papers he should probably organize but never got around to. The shoebox lid went on with satisfying finality, containing the evidence of his investigative obsession in a way that wouldn't immediately scandalize anyone who happened to glance around his apartment.

Now where to hide it?

Under the bed was too obvious, the first place anyone would look if they were snooping. The closet was barely functional, too small and too visible. He needed somewhere that would be truly forgotten, somewhere Mrs. Kowalski wouldn't accidentally discover if she was looking for fish food or needed to use his bathroom.

The cabinet above the refrigerator caught his eye. High enough to be inconvenient, deep enough to hide things, rarely accessed because he barely cooked and had nothing worth storing up there anyway. It was perfect.

Vox shoved the shoebox to the very back of the cabinet, pushing it past some dishes he'd never used and a container of salt that had probably been there since before he'd moved in. The box disappeared into the shadows, invisible unless someone was actively looking for it.

He stepped back, surveying his apartment with a critical eye.

The place was still a disaster, but it was a different kind of disaster now. Instead of looking like someone obsessed with tracking a potential serial killer, it just looked like someone who didn't clean very often and had questionable priorities about home maintenance.

The fish tank still needed cleaning, the water having developed a slight cloudiness that suggested he'd been overfeeding or underfeeding or doing something wrong. The floor could use sweeping, accumulated dust and grime visible in the corners where light hit at the right angle. The Murphy bed was unmade, sheets tangled and obviously not changed in longer than was probably hygienic.

But none of that screamed "mentally unstable person conducting unauthorized murder investigation." It just screamed "bachelor who doesn't know how to take care of himself," which was much more socially acceptable.

Vox spent the next thirty minutes doing the bare minimum to make the space presentable. Swept the floor, gathered the scattered newspapers and papers into neat piles, washed the dishes that had been accumulating in his sink, pulled bedsheets straight and tucked them in ways that suggested they might have been changed recently even if they hadn't.

The fish tank got fresh water, the old water carefully siphoned out and replaced with clean tap water that he let sit for a few minutes to reach room temperature before adding it. The guppies seemed unbothered by the disruption, continuing their eternal circuit as if nothing had changed.

By the time he finished, the apartment looked almost respectable. Still sparse, still obviously the home of someone without much money or many possessions, but no longer actively concerning from a mental health perspective.

Good enough.

Vox glanced at the clock on his desk. Too late to visit Mrs. Kowalski tonight, she'd probably already gone to bed and wouldn't appreciate being disturbed. He'd have to wait until Monday after work, would have to figure out what to bring her as an offering and exactly how to phrase his request in ways that made it seem reasonable rather than presumptuous.

Monday after work then. He'd drop by her apartment with the clean dishes, some kind of gift that wouldn't seem too expensive or too cheap, and a carefully prepared explanation for why he needed her to feed his fish while he was attending an important professional development conference in Hartford.

The plan was solid. This would work. It had to work, because the alternative was coming home to dead fish and that would be depressing in ways he didn't want to contemplate.

Vox looked at the fish one more time, at the two guppies swimming their circles in their too small tank, locked in their eternal dance.

"Don't worry," he told them, his voice carrying more confidence than he actually felt. "I'll make sure someone takes care of you. You just have to survive until Monday evening when I can secure your caretaker. No dying before then. That's an order."

The fish offered no acknowledgment of these instructions.

Vox turned off the lights and climbed into bed, his mind already racing ahead to Hartford. The fish feeding logistics were handled, or would be handled Monday. His apartment was presentable enough for brief visitor access. His suitcase was packed.

Everything was falling into place exactly as it should.

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Monday morning arrived with crisp winter sunlight that did nothing to warm the freezing air. Vox walked to the station with his coat pulled tight, his breath misting white, his mind already racing ahead to the conversation he needed to have with Sterling.

The newsroom was its usual chaos when he arrived, people rushing between desks with coffee cups and papers. Vox navigated through the chaos with practiced ease, nodding at familiar faces, deflecting Margaret's cheerful greeting with promises to talk later.

Sterling's office loomed ahead, the door partially open, the station manager visible inside reviewing what looked like budget reports with the particular scowl he reserved for financial

matters.

Vox knocked, three measured taps against the doorframe.

Sterling looked up, his scowl deepening fractionally. "Whittman. What do you want? If this is about the Miller Brothers wanting another presentation change I swear to god I'm going to start charging them for revisions."

"Nothing about the Millers, sir." Vox stepped inside, closing the door behind him with careful casualness. "I wanted to discuss a professional development opportunity that's come to my attention."

Sterling's expression shifted to suspicion, his eyes narrowing. "Professional development always means someone wants something that's going to cost me money or cause me headaches."

"The Hartford symposium," Vox said, diving in before Sterling could build momentum on his skepticism. "I understand there's a broadcasting conference this week. Technical demonstrations, industry networking, panel discussions about emerging technologies. It seems like exactly the kind of event that would benefit someone in my position, help me stay current on developments that could inform our equipment purchasing decisions."

He kept his tone professional, almost casual, like this was a passing thought rather than something he'd been obsessing over.

Sterling set down his pen with deliberate care, leaning back in his chair. The leather creaked under his weight. "The Hartford symposium is a radio event, Whittman. Why would television staff need to attend a radio conference?"

"Cross platform coordination," Vox said smoothly, the explanation rolling off his tongue with practiced ease. "The technologies are increasingly interconnected. Signal processing innovations developed for radio often have direct applications for television. Plus there's value in building relationships with the radio side's technical contacts, establishing communication channels that could streamline future collaborative projects."

The reasoning was sound enough that Sterling couldn't dismiss it outright, though his expression suggested he remained unconvinced.

"Besides," Vox added, letting enthusiasm color his voice just slightly, "I've been handling more client facing responsibilities lately. The Miller Brothers, the recent broadcast work. Having exposure to industry events would help me represent the station more effectively in those contexts. Learn how other professionals handle similar challenges, observe best practices I could bring back and implement here."

Sterling drummed his fingers on the desk, his gaze assessing. "That's a pretty speech. You practice that on the way over here?"

"Only a little," Vox admitted with a bright smile.

Something that might have been amusement flickered across Sterling's face before his professional skepticism reasserted itself. "Look, Whittman, I appreciate the initiative. Really. But I already tried to get television representation at Hartford. Talked to Boucher about it last week. He said no."

The information hit Vox harder than expected, though he kept his expression neutral. "He said no? Why?"

"Didn't specify exactly." Sterling shrugged, picking up his pen again to fidget with it. "Something about the radio station having concerns. Budget constraints, scheduling conflicts, the usual corporate nonsense that translates to them not wanting us there but being too polite to say so directly."

Vox felt his jaw tighten fractionally before he forced it to relax. Of course Alastor hadn't mentioned this initially. Of course he'd positioned things so Vincent would have to fight for permission to attend, would have to demonstrate exactly how badly he wanted to be there. The manipulation was elegant and infuriating in equal measure.

But Alastor had also given him the opening, had told him during the tour that attending wasn't entirely unreasonable if Sterling could be convinced. Which meant this refusal wasn't final, just an obstacle to work around.

"What if I covered the costs myself?" The words came out before Vox had fully thought through the implications. "Hotel, meals, transportation. Everything. The station wouldn't have to spend a dime on my attendance."

Sterling's eyebrows rose, genuine surprise replacing the professional skepticism. "You can do that?"

"Yes." Vox kept his voice confident despite the slight flutter of uncertainty in his chest. He could afford it, technically. The money Alastor had given him for David's component budget could cover a few days in Hartford. The fact that he was using those funds for personal expenses rather than project materials was something he'd deal with later.

Sterling stared at him for a long moment, his expression cycling through several emotions too quickly to identify individually. Then, unexpectedly, he laughed. A full belly laugh that made his chair creak and his shoulders shake, the sound genuine and slightly bewildered.

"Boy, I have been paying you way too much if you've got enough saved up to spend it on business trips!" Sterling slapped his hand on the desk for emphasis, his amusement evident. "Here I've been worried about whether we're compensating you fairly and you're sitting on enough cash to fund your own professional development. Maybe I should reconsider that raise I was thinking about."

Vox forced a polite laugh, the sound careful and measured. "I wouldn't say I'm sitting on piles of cash, sir. Just managed my finances carefully."

Sterling's laughter faded into a knowing smile, his eyes tracking over Vox's appearance with new attention. "Managed your finances carefully. Right. Son, you look like you haven't bought groceries in a month. Been saving up by not eating?"

The observation was delivered with enough genuine concern mixed with the teasing that Vox couldn't quite dismiss it as pure mockery.

"I eat perfectly adequate meals," Vox said, which was technically true even if those meals consisted primarily of whatever was cheapest and required minimal preparation. "Just prioritizing different expenditures."

"Uh huh." Sterling's smile had shifted into something more assessing. He paused, then added with deliberate casualness, "Because you sure seem like it."

The comment hung in the air between them, loaded with implications Vox chose not to examine too closely.

"Look," Sterling continued, leaning forward with his elbows on the desk, his tone becoming more businesslike. "If you've genuinely got the money and you're willing to spend it on this, then go. I'm not going to stop you from pursuing professional development on your own dime. That's initiative I can respect."

Relief flooded through Vox's chest, though he kept his expression controlled. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your support."

"Don't thank me yet." Sterling picked up a different paper from his desk, scanning it briefly before returning his attention to Vox. "The radio station didn't want our people going partly because of money, sure. But also..." He trailed off meaningfully, his expression suggesting there were things he wasn't saying directly.

"Also?" Vox prompted, genuinely curious now.

Sterling's mouth curved into something that was almost a smirk. "Well, let's just say they like to think they're operating on a different level than us television folk. Radio's been around longer, has more established traditions and protocols. Some of them get a bit precious about maintaining those distinctions, about not letting the new medium muddy their professional waters."

The explanation was diplomatic but the underlying message was clear. The radio people thought they were superior and didn't want television representatives contaminating their prestigious industry event.

Vox felt a smile spread across his face, genuine and sharp. "So they think we're beneath their notice."

Sterling's smirk widened into something more appreciative. "I wouldn't phrase it exactly like that in mixed company, but yes. That's the general gist of it."

"Well then." Vox leaned back, his posture relaxing into something more confident. "I suppose attending becomes even more appealing. Nothing like proving assumptions wrong through direct demonstration of competence."

Sterling laughed again, this time louder, slapping the table hard enough to make papers jump. "You've got a good head on those shoulders, boy! I like that. Most people would get defensive or offended, but you're seeing it as an opportunity. That's exactly the kind of thinking that's going to take you far in this industry."

The praise felt good despite Vox knowing it was partially performative, Sterling encouraging the kind of competitive energy that would benefit the station's reputation. But genuine or not, the approval carried weight.

"Just don't make me regret approving this," Sterling added, his tone shifting back toward warning. "You're representing the television station whether you're paying your own way or not. Professional behavior, appropriate networking, no incidents that would embarrass us or give the radio people ammunition to use against us in future coordination discussions."

"Understood completely, sir." Vox stood, recognizing the dismissal. "I'll make sure the station's reputation is enhanced, not damaged."

"Good. Now get out of here."

Vox left Sterling's office with barely contained energy thrumming through his system. The conversation had gone better than expected, Sterling's approval secured through a combination of reasonable arguments and financial commitment. Hartford trip was happening, officially sanctioned even if self funded.

He was halfway back to his desk when he spotted Margaret near the filing cabinets. She looked up as he approached, her face brightening immediately.

"Vincent! I've been meaning to ask you about Hartford. Are you attending too?" Her enthusiasm was genuine, her posture shifting to face him fully.

"Yes, just got Sterling's approval actually." Vox kept his tone light, conversational, despite the sudden tension that had appeared in his chest. "Should be interesting."

"Oh wonderful! We can travel together then. I'm taking the early train Thursday, the one that arrives in Hartford around noon. If you're on the same one we could coordinate our arrival, maybe share a cab from the station to the hotel."

The suggestion was practical and friendly, the natural coordination between two people attending the same event. Vox recognized this logically even as something inside him recoiled from the implications.

He forced his smile to remain warm, his voice to stay enthusiastic. "That sounds perfect. It'll be nice having company for the journey."

The words felt like ash in his mouth but came out sounding genuine enough that Margaret's smile widened.

"I'm so excited! I've never been to Hartford before and this seems like such a wonderful opportunity for networking. Plus having you there will make the whole thing more enjoyable. These industry events can be rather stuffy and having someone familiar to talk to makes such a difference."

Vox made appropriate sounds of agreement while his mind churned through the new complication. Margaret was coming to Hartford. Of course she was coming to Hartford. She worked in advertising coordination, these symposiums were exactly the kind of event where her professional skills would be relevant and valued.

But having her there meant constant proximity, meant maintaining the boyfriend performance throughout the entire trip, meant his time and attention would be split between the person he actually wanted to focus on and the person he was supposed to be romantically involved with.

The irritation settled in his stomach like lead. What was she even going to do there? Wander around networking with advertising executives while the actual interesting technical demonstrations happened elsewhere? Expect him to escort her to tedious social functions when he could be observing equipment manufacturers showing off their latest innovations?

She was going to interfere. She was going to expect his attention and his time and his performance of devoted boyfriend when all of those resources needed to be directed toward actually productive activities. Toward Alastor and the technology demonstrations and the professional connections that might be genuinely useful.

"I should get back to work," Margaret said, glancing at the stack of papers waiting for her attention. "But I'll talk to you later about the travel arrangements. We can coordinate our schedules, make sure we're staying at the same hotel."

"Absolutely," Vox agreed, his smile remaining fixed even as his internal irritation intensified. "Looking forward to it."

He watched her return to her filing, completely unaware of what was happening behind his pleasant expression. But then, as he turned back toward his own desk, a different thought surfaced. One that shifted his perspective with surprising swiftness.

Maybe this wasn't entirely bad. Maybe having Margaret along could actually work in his favor in ways he hadn't initially considered.

Alastor had needled him before about his relationship status, had made pointed comments about girlfriends and social obligations. Had seemed almost disapproving of Vincent's attachment to Margaret.

But if Vox showed up to Hartford with Margaret in tow, clearly coupled, obviously committed to maintaining this relationship, then Alastor wouldn't have the same opening for his usual mockery. Couldn't make comments about Vincent being inappropriately focused or obsessively attentive because Vincent would demonstrably be focused on someone else entirely.

Besides, this social camouflage would deflect certain kinds of observation and commentary. And if Margaret's presence also served to make Vox seem more stable, more normal, more like the kind of person who maintained appropriate personal relationships rather than fixating on business associates, that was additional benefit.

Plus there was the simple fact that Alastor seemed uncomfortable with public romantic displays. Had visibly recoiled from the interaction in the hallway when Margaret had been affectionate. Which meant leaning into that dynamic might actually give Vox more control over when and how interactions happened.

Kill two birds with one stone, as the saying went. Maintain the Margaret relationship that provided useful social cover at the station while simultaneously using that relationship as a shield against certain kinds of scrutiny from Alastor.

The logic was sound enough that Vox's irritation began to fade, replaced by something closer to satisfaction. This could work. This could actually work quite well if he played it correctly.

He settled at his desk, pulling out the weather maps that needed updating, his mind already running through potential scenarios for Hartford. Margaret would be there, yes. But that didn't have to be a problem. Could actually be an asset if he was smart about leveraging her presence.

The smile that spread across Vox's face was genuine this time, sharp with anticipation.

This was going to be interesting.

Chapter 49

The walk home from work took Vox past several shops he'd never paid attention to before, their windows displaying goods that suddenly seemed relevant now that he needed to bring Mrs. Kowalski something.

A gift shop caught his eye, its display window cluttered with decorative items and seasonal merchandise. He pushed through the door, a small bell chiming overhead to announce his entrance.

The interior smelled like mildew and dust, an overwhelming combination that made his nose itch. Display racks lined every available wall space, crowded with ceramic figurines, decorative plates, scented candles, and other items whose purpose he couldn't immediately identify.

A clerk stood behind the counter, a young woman who looked exhausted from working retail during slow hours.

"Can I help you find something?" Her voice was professionally pleasant but carried undertones of hoping he'd say no and just browse quietly.

"I need something for my neighbor." Vox approached the counter, scanning the nearby displays without seeing anything that seemed appropriate. "What do old women like?"

The clerk blinked at the bluntness but recovered quickly, her professional training kicking in to smooth over the social awkwardness. "Well, we have some lovely decorative pieces over here, hand painted ceramics that are very popular. And this section has scented candles, very high quality, imported from France."

She gestured to a display of items that looked expensive even from a distance, their price tags carefully positioned to be visible. The ceramics were delicate things, painted with flowers and pastoral scenes, existing purely for decoration without any practical function. Useless, in

other words, but apparently that's what people bought when they wanted to demonstrate they valued someone.

Vox followed her, half listening to her explanation of various products while his mind calculated costs. The ceramics were beautifully made, he'd admit that much, the craftsmanship was evident in the precise brushwork and the quality of the glaze. But the smallest piece was marked at twelve dollars. The candles ranged from eight to fifteen depending on size.

Too much. Way too much for what was essentially a transaction to secure fish feeding services.

"Do you have anything cheaper?" Vox interrupted her mid description of French lavender fields or Provence or whatever story she was spinning to justify the candle prices. "I'm not looking to spend more than a few dollars."

The clerk's enthusiasm dimmed slightly, her smile becoming more fixed as she recalibrated her sales approach. She pivoted to a different section, showing him smaller items. Decorative spoons with enamel handles, porcelain bells that played tiny tunes when shaken, framed prints of countryside scenes that looked mass produced despite being marketed as artistic.

Still expensive. Still more than he wanted to spend on someone who was basically just a neighbor doing him a favor that benefited her as much as him since she'd explicitly stated she didn't want a corpse in the hallway.

"These are still five to eight dollars each," Vox said, his patience wearing thin with each passing moment in this stuffy shop surrounded by useless decorative objects. "I meant cheap. Under three dollars. It's just a neighbor, she's not that important."

The clerk's expression went carefully neutral, her professional smile becoming fixed in a way that communicated profound judgment. She gestured stiffly toward a clearance bin near the door. "We have some marked down items there. Mostly damaged goods or old inventory."

"Perfect." Vox walked over without acknowledging the coldness in her tone, without caring that he'd apparently violated some unspoken rule about how much affection one should demonstrate towards their elderly neighbors.

He rifled through the bin's contents. Chipped teacups with hairline cracks running through the porcelain. Faded decorative plates whose painted designs had worn away in patches. Candles with broken wicks or lids that didn't quite fit properly. A ceramic cat figurine missing one ear. A music box that probably didn't play music anymore given the way something rattled inside when he picked it up.

Nothing particularly appealing, but that wasn't really the point. The actual quality or thoughtfulness of the gift was secondary to the transaction itself.

He selected a small ceramic dish with a crack along one edge, marked down to two dollars. It was octagonal, painted with a simple floral pattern in blues and yellows that had probably been prettier before years of display had faded the colors. The crack was barely visible unless you looked closely, running from the rim toward the center but not quite reaching all the way through. Functional enough for someone to put their keys or jewelry in, decorative enough to qualify as a gift rather than just garbage.

The clerk rang it up, her earlier warmth completely evaporated. She wrapped it, the tissue paper crumpling slightly as she folded it around the dish.

"Will there be anything else?"

"No, that's everything." Vox handed over the exact change, already turning toward the door before the transaction finished.

The bell chimed again as he made his exit. The cold air outside felt cleaner than the shop's interior, the smell of the city's exhaust and garbage almost preferable in comparison.

The ceramic dish felt light in his hand, almost weightless despite being solid pottery. Two dollars for something that would probably sit on Mrs. Kowalski's counter collecting dust until she eventually died. But it would serve its purpose before then.

The bakery was down the street, its window display showing rows of fresh bread and pastries that actually looked appealing. More importantly, the small placard indicated prices that were significantly more reasonable than hand painted French ceramics or artisanal candles.

The interior smelled overwhelmingly of yeast and sugar, warm and heavy in a way that made his empty stomach clench with sudden hunger. The display cases were still relatively full despite it being late afternoon, probably because they either produced large quantities or didn't have much foot traffic at this hour.

A different type of clerk here, older man with flour dusted across his apron and tired eyes. He looked up as Vox entered but didn't offer immediate greeting, apparently waiting to see if this was a customer who knew what they wanted or someone who needed extensive assistance.

"I need a box of cookies," Vox said, approaching the counter and scanning the options available. "Something that looks nice but isn't expensive. Under three dollars."

The baker nodded, moving to a shelf behind him where several boxes were stacked. "Butter cookies, two fifty. Decent presentation, everyone likes them well enough. Or there's shortbread for two seventy five if you want something that looks slightly fancier."

Vox selected the butter cookies, appreciating the straightforward transaction without judgment or excessive sales pitch. The baker wrapped them efficiently, his movements practiced and quick, and rang up the purchase without commentary.

The exchange was clean and professional, exactly what retail should be. Vox paid with bills from the envelope Alastor had given him for David's component budget, trying not to think too hard about how much of that money he'd already burned through on personal expenses that had nothing to do with the actual project.

Train tickets to Hartford. Hotel room he'd have to book. Now bakery cookies and ceramic dishes. The fund was hemorrhaging money for purposes that weren't technical components or engineering labor, purposes that would be difficult to justify in any kind of financial review.

He really needed to stop using those funds for everything. Eventually he'd have to account for the spending and explain to Alastor why the component budget had been depleted on items that had nothing to do with broadcast technology development. That conversation was going to be unpleasant when it inevitably happened.

But that was a problem for future Vox. Present Vox had a fish feeder to secure and travel plans to handle and only so much mental bandwidth to allocate toward crisis management.

The walk back to his apartment building felt longer than usual. The evening was settling into that particular winter darkness that arrived too early, making everything feel colder and more hostile than it actually was.

Mrs. Kowalski's apartment was on the same floor as his, just down the hall, close enough that he'd heard her television playing through the walls on quiet evenings.

He knocked on her door with three measured taps that sounded louder than intended in the quiet hallway. His arms were getting tired from holding everything, the soup bowl slipping slightly against the tray's metal surface with small scraping sounds.

The door opened after a moment, Mrs. Kowalski appearing in her usual nightrobe despite it being early evening. Her hair was still in curlers, as if she either didn't bother with appearances outside her apartment or had been preparing for bed at an absurdly early hour. Her expression cycled from surprise to recognition to something that might have been pleasure.

"Whittman! You're looking better. Got some color back in your face, not so much like death warmed over." Her eyes dropped to the items he was carrying, her eyebrows rising with curiosity. "Is that my bowl?"

"Yes. I meant to return it sooner." Vox held out the bowl and tray, both cleaned to the best of his limited abilities. "And I brought you these as a thank you for the soup. It really helped when I was sick."

He presented the cookie box with what he hoped was appropriate gratitude, the gesture feeling performative.

Mrs. Kowalski's expression softened further, genuine warmth replacing the casual gruffness she usually displayed. Her hands reached for the items before pulling back suddenly.

"Oh no no no, you keep those sweets for yourself. You need them more than I do, you're still too thin. Look at you, nothing but bones! The soup was nothing, just leftovers I had sitting around anyway."

"Please, I insist." Vox pushed the box toward her more firmly, not willing to accept refusal now that he'd committed to this transaction and needed it completed so he could move on to asking for the actual favor. "You took time to check on me when I was sick, made sure I was eating properly. That deserves more than just returning your dishes. These are from that bakery everyone raves about, the one on Fifth Street."

He was laying it on thick, building up the significance of both her kindness and his reciprocal gesture. The bakery was well regarded, he'd heard people at the station mention it approvingly, which meant the cookies carried more social value than their two dollar cost would suggest.

Mrs. Kowalski's resistance crumbled visibly, finally accepting the cookie box with the careful reverence of someone receiving something genuinely valued.

"Well, if you insist. That's very thoughtful of you, dear. Very thoughtful indeed." She looked up at him, her expression shifting into something more maternal than their previous interactions had suggested. "These do look lovely. I'll have them with my tea tonight, make it a special occasion."

It was perfect. She was sufficiently pleased, the transaction balanced enough that asking for a favor wouldn't seem too presumptuous.

"Actually," Vox said, his tone shifting to casual request, "I was hoping I could ask you for a small favor. Nothing major, just a bit of help while I'm away on a business trip this week."

Mrs. Kowalski's attention sharpened immediately, her expression becoming more assessing as she processed this new information. The warmth remained but was now mixed with curiosity and what looked like concern. "Business trip? Where are you going?"

"Hartford. Broadcasting symposium, professional development opportunity." The explanation flowed smoothly. "I'll be gone Thursday through Sunday, four days total. It could really benefit my career, open some doors that are currently closed."

That last part was true, actually. If things went well in Hartford, if he managed to navigate the conference correctly and make the right impressions, it could significantly advance his position. Though probably not in the ways Mrs. Kowalski would assume.

"Good for you!" Mrs. Kowalski seemed genuinely pleased by the idea of her neighbor advancing professionally. "Always good to see young people taking their careers seriously instead of just coasting along. What kind of favor do you need? Someone to water plants? Pick up mail?"

"I have fish," Vox said, the admission feeling slightly embarrassing for reasons he couldn't quite articulate. Maybe because it revealed a level of domestic normalcy he wasn't comfortable displaying or maybe because caring about fish welfare seemed pathetically mundane for someone like him. "Just two small ones, very low maintenance. But they'll need feeding while I'm gone. Once a day, just a small pinch of food. I was hoping you might be willing to stop by my apartment and take care of that? I'd leave a key with you, you could come by whenever is convenient."

Mrs. Kowalski's eyebrows rose, her expression cycling through several emotions in quick succession. Surprise, curiosity, something that looked almost like approval. "Fish? You have fish? How long have you had them?"

"A few months, maybe? Time gets away from me sometimes." Vox kept his voice casual, like this was a perfectly normal hobby that required no explanation or justification. He didn't actually remember where Vincent had acquired the first guppy or why, but that information was irrelevant to the current negotiation.

"Well." Mrs. Kowalski set the cookie box down on a small table near her door, her hands going to her hips. "I suppose I could do that. Fish aren't too difficult, just food and maybe check the water level. But I want to see these fish first, make sure I know what I'm dealing with. Come on, let's go look at them."

The command was delivered with enough authority that Vox found himself leading her back down the hallway toward his own apartment before he could fully process what was happening. This was fine, actually. Better than fine. He'd cleaned specifically so she could come in without being scandalized by the state of his living space. The apartment was presentable now, organized enough to suggest a functional adult lived here.

He unlocked his door and stepped inside, holding it open for Mrs. Kowalski to follow. The space looked exactly as he'd left it that morning.

Pride swelled in his chest as Mrs. Kowalski stepped through the doorway, her eyes scanning the small apartment with the sharp attention of someone evaluating another person's living situation. He'd done well with the cleanup. The place looked fine, perfectly acceptable for brief visitor access, nothing embarrassing or suspicious visible to casual observation.

Mrs. Kowalski's nose wrinkled immediately, her expression shifting into something between concern and disgust.

She didn't say anything, but the gesture was clear enough to shatter Vox's brief moment of pride. The apartment smelled bad. Despite his cleaning, despite the fresh air from leaving windows open, despite his best efforts at making the space habitable, something about it smelled off in ways that were immediately noticeable to anyone entering from the hallway.

The pride was replaced by uncomfortable awareness that no amount of surface cleaning could address whatever fundamental issue was causing the odor. Old building problems, poor ventilation, accumulated mustiness that had seeped into the walls and floors over decades. Or maybe it was him, maybe his body or his clothes or something personal that he couldn't smell anymore because he'd acclimated to it but that was obvious to outsiders.

The thought was deeply unpleasant.

"So," Vox said, trying to move past the moment with forced casualness, gesturing toward the fish tank on the small table. "Here are the fish. Very simple, very low maintenance. I've been feeding them once a day, just a small pinch of the food from that container there."

Mrs. Kowalski approached the tank with careful movements, her attention focusing on the two guppies swimming their usual circuits. The larger one was doing its predatory stalking routine, following the smaller one with patient determination. The smaller one was trying to hide behind the plastic plant, its torn fins making its movements slower and more labored than they should be.

Then Mrs. Kowalski's expression shifted again, this time into clear disapproval that was somehow worse than her reaction to the apartment's smell.

"This tank is filthy." Her voice was sharp suddenly, accusatory in a way that made Vox bristle immediately with defensive indignation. "Look at this water, it's cloudy! And there's algae growing on the glass, green stuff all over the sides. When was the last time you cleaned this properly? Actually properly, not whatever you think cleaning means."

"I just cleaned it yesterday," Vox protested, genuinely confused about what she was seeing that he'd missed. The water had looked clear to him when he'd checked that morning, the glass acceptably transparent.

"This is your idea of clean?" Mrs. Kowalski shook her head slowly, her disappointment palpable and somehow more cutting than anger would have been. "Boy, you can't even take proper care of fish. How are you managing to take care of yourself? Do you eat regular meals? When was the last time you saw a doctor?"

The questions felt rhetorical but carried genuine concern underneath the criticism, which made them harder to dismiss. Vox found himself wanting to defend his efforts, to explain that he was doing better than he had been, that the current state represented significant improvement from the disaster his life had been just weeks ago.

But saying that would only make things worse, would reveal that his current state was actually an achievement rather than the obvious failure Mrs. Kowalski was perceiving. Would open up questions about what his life had looked like before, why it had been so bad, what had changed to make it slightly less terrible.

The realization struck him hard. No matter how much he tried, his efforts at basic human functioning were essentially meaningless. The gap between his best attempts and actual competence was too wide to bridge through simple determination. He was failing at things that apparently came naturally to other people, things that shouldn't require this much effort but somehow did.

Mrs. Kowalski leaned closer to the tank, her attention shifting from the water quality to the fish themselves. Her expression softened slightly as she watched them swim, though the disapproval didn't fully disappear. "What's the little fellow's name? The one with the torn fins."

Vox was still processing his failure spiral, her question not immediately registering. His mind was elsewhere, cataloging all the ways he'd thought things were fine when they clearly weren't, wondering what other aspects of his life were disasters he simply couldn't perceive through his compromised judgment.

"Hm?" He blinked, snapping back to the present with disoriented confusion. "What?"

Mrs. Kowalski looked at him over her shoulder, one eyebrow raised. "The fish. What are their names? You do have names for them, don't you? You can't just call them 'the fish' like they're interchangeable objects."

Names. Right. The fish should have names. His brain scrambled for something appropriate, reaching for anything that would sound like a reasonable name for a guppy.

"Shockwave," he said, the word emerging without conscious thought.

Mrs. Kowalski's other eyebrow joined the first, both now raised in an expression of profound skepticism that communicated exactly what she thought about naming a tiny fish something so aggressively dramatic. "Shockwave? Like an earthquake?"

Vox stared at her, his brain still catching up to what his mouth had produced without permission. The name was ridiculous, he could see that now through her eyes. Completely inappropriate for a small guppy with torn fins who spent most of its time hiding behind a plastic plant. But he'd committed to it now, couldn't take it back without looking even more incompetent than he already appeared.

He shrugged helplessly. "Like an earthquake."

"And the other one?" she prompted, her voice carrying resignation that suggested she was bracing for another equally ridiculous name.

Shit. He hadn't thought that far ahead. "Uh..."

"You didn't name the other one." Mrs. Kowalski's tone made it a statement rather than a question. "You named one fish something stupid and didn't even bother with the second one."

"I just got the second one recently." Vox offered weakly, knowing it was a poor excuse even as the words left his mouth. "Haven't had time to think of something appropriate."

"Right." Mrs. Kowalski shook her head again, that same slow disappointed movement. "Well, you think about that while you're in Hartford. Give the poor thing a name before you get back. How much do I feed them? How often? And please tell me you at least know that much."

"Once a day," Vox said with more confidence than he actually felt. "Just a pinch of the food, maybe this much?" He demonstrated with his fingers, showing an amount that was probably too much or too little based on the way Mrs. Kowalski's expression tightened.

"That looks like way too much. You're probably overfeeding them, that's part of why the water's so cloudy." She reached for the food container, examining the flakes inside. "You feed them a few flakes each, not a whole pinch. Like five or six flakes total for both fish. That's it."

Vox watched as she demonstrated the correct amount, her fingers selecting individual flakes with care he hadn't bothered with. It looked like almost nothing, barely enough to qualify as food, but apparently that was the correct portion size for creatures this small.

He'd been overfeeding them for weeks. No wonder the smaller one was still alive despite constant harassment, it probably had enough excess nutrition to survive having chunks taken out of it regularly.

"I'll do it properly," Mrs. Kowalski said, setting the food container back down with more force than necessary. "But when you get back from your trip, I'm going to teach you how to do this right. How to clean the tank properly, how to test the water, how to make sure these fish are actually healthy instead of just barely surviving."

She turned to face him fully, her hands on her hips again, her expression severe. "And we're going to have a serious discussion about your apartment's smell and whether you're taking care of yourself properly. These fish deserve better care than they're getting, and frankly so do you. So I'll be checking on you more regularly from now on. Making sure you're eating proper meals and maintaining a clean home."

Alarm rose in Vox's chest at the thought of regular welfare checks, of having his neighbor monitoring his life with this level of scrutiny. "That's really not necessary. I'm fine, I just have different standards for..."

"I'm not offering." Mrs. Kowalski cut him off with the authority of someone who'd made a decision and wasn't interested in debate or negotiation. "I'm telling you. This is what's going to happen. You can accept it gracefully or you can complain, but either way I'll be stopping by to make sure things are acceptable. That's final."

She headed toward the door, her posture suggesting the conversation was concluded and further protest would be futile. Vox followed helplessly, his protests dying before they could form coherent arguments that might change her mind.

"I'll come by Thursday morning before you leave to get your key," Mrs. Kowalski said from the doorway, her tone brooking no argument. "Make sure you're actually ready for this trip and not just wandering off without proper preparation. And we're going to have that discussion when you get back. This is unacceptable, Whittman. Completely unacceptable."

The door closed behind her with decisive finality, leaving Vox standing in his apartment that apparently smelled bad and contained a filthy fish tank he'd thought was clean and fish he'd been systematically overfeeding while giving them ridiculous names.

He sighed deeply, walking over to collapse into his armchair. The springs creaked under his weight, the familiar protest of furniture that had seen better days decades ago. His head fell back against the cushion, his eyes closing as he tried to process everything that had just happened.

Well, at least the fish would be fed while he was gone. That was the important thing, the objective achieved despite the cost coming attached to regular welfare checks and lectures about basic life competency he apparently lacked.

The apartment settled into its usual evening quiet around him, just the fish tank bubbling and the distant sounds of the city filtering through his windows. Somewhere down the hall he could hear Mrs. Kowalski's television turning on, the muffled sound of evening programming starting up.

She'd be watching him now, he realized. Not literally, but in the way neighbors watched each other when they'd decided someone needed supervision. She'd notice if he came home at strange hours, if he looked sick again, if his apartment started smelling worse or if anything seemed off about his behavior.

The surveillance was going to be irritating but probably unavoidable at this point. He'd opened the door, literally and figuratively, and now Mrs. Kowalski had appointed herself as his unofficial guardian whether he wanted one or not.

Vox sat there for several minutes, letting the silence settle around him, letting his mind process and file away the experience for future reference.

He should probably eat something. Should finalize his packing for Hartford, make sure he hadn't forgotten anything essential for four days away from his apartment. Should prepare for the morning routine that would include Mrs. Kowalski's inspection before she accepted his key and took on fish feeding responsibilities.

Instead his mind kept drifting to logistics he hadn't actually confirmed. When exactly was he leaving? Thursday morning, but what time? Where were they meeting? At the station? At the train platform? Who else would be attending besides him and Alastor? How long was the train journey to Hartford? What was the hotel situation? Separate rooms presumably, but in the same building? Different buildings? What was the schedule once they arrived?

Basic questions that he should know the answers to but didn't, because he'd been so focused on securing permission to attend that he'd never actually asked about the practical details that would determine how the next four days unfolded.

He wanted to call Alastor and ask these logistical questions under the pretense of coordination and preparation. But really he just wanted to maybe casually mention that he'd successfully convinced Sterling and would definitely be attending and wouldn't that be nice, four days in Hartford together. Four days where they'd presumably be in close proximity, possibly working together on whatever Alastor's actual agenda was for attending this conference.

The thought made him feel stupid and obvious and transparent. But he couldn't quite suppress the anticipation that had been building since the conversation with Sterling, the electric awareness that Hartford represented an opportunity for something he couldn't quite articulate.

But he didn't have Alastor's number. Had never gotten it, had never thought to ask for it directly, had assumed their communication would always be routed through Barbara or happen in person during scheduled meetings. Calling the station this late would just reach whoever was manning the evening desk, and asking them to connect him to Alastor's personal line seemed presumptuous and potentially embarrassing.

Though, Vox thought with sudden curiosity, how did Alastor have his number? He'd called that night when Vox was sick, had somehow known exactly how to reach him despite Vox never providing that information directly through any channel he could remember.

Barbara must have given it to him. Or he'd gotten it from station records, from the employee files that listed contact information for everyone on staff. Some administrative channel that gave him access to numbers without needing to ask individuals directly. That made sense,

was the logical explanation for how Alastor could reach him while Vox couldn't reciprocate without going through intermediaries.

But it still felt strange, the asymmetry of it. Alastor being able to call him at home, in his private space, while Vox could only contact him through official channels that filtered everything through professional distance. Like Alastor had access to parts of his life that Vox couldn't access in return.

The imbalance was irritating in ways Vox couldn't quite articulate. Another small demonstration of the power differential between them, another reminder that their relationship operated on Alastor's terms rather than mutual negotiation.

Vox looked at his own phone sitting on the side table, silent and unhelpful. He could call the station tomorrow, drop by in person after work, manufacture some excuse about needing to discuss Hartford logistics or technical specifications that required clarification. Use that as cover to ask his questions while making it seem like he wasn't specifically seeking out Alastor but just handling necessary administrative details.

Yeah. That's what he'd do. Tomorrow after work, he'd just happen to be in the area, just happened to have some logistical questions about Hartford that needed answering before Thursday morning. Completely natural, completely professional, nothing suspicious about it at all.

Tonight he'd just... sit here. In his apartment that smelled bad with his fish tank that was apparently filthy despite his best cleaning efforts. With his fish named Shockwave and unnamed fish number two who both deserved better care than they were getting according to Mrs. Kowalski.

The phone rang.

The sound cut through his thoughts with jarring suddenness, mechanical and aggressive in the quiet apartment. Vox stared at it for a moment, his brain taking longer than it should to process the simple fact that his phone was ringing at this hour.

He reached for the receiver, his hand moving automatically even as his mind raced through possibilities about who would be calling. His fingers closed around the receiver, lifting it to his ear.

Chapter 50

"Good evening." Alastor's voice came through the line with perfect clarity, that familiar theatrical flair slightly muted but still present. "I hope I'm not calling too late. I wanted to follow up about Hartford."

Vox's brain short circuited completely. He'd literally just been thinking about calling Alastor, had been sitting here wishing he had a way to make contact, and now Alastor was calling him. Like he'd somehow read Vox's mind, sensed the desire for communication across the city and decided to reach out at the exact moment Vox needed him to.

"No, not too late at all," Vox managed, his voice coming out steadier than he felt. "I was just thinking about that actually."

"Excellent timing then." Alastor's tone remained professionally pleasant. "I wanted to confirm that you'd spoken with Sterling."

Of course this was just business follow up, practical coordination about who would be attending the symposium. Nothing more significant than that.

"I talked to him this morning actually." Vox leaned back in his chair, the springs creaking under his weight. The conversation with Sterling felt like it had happened days ago rather than hours, the memory slightly fuzzy with everything else that had occurred since. "It went very well. Better than expected, honestly."

"Did it?"

"He was extremely supportive." Vox heard himself embellishing, unable to resist making the story more impressive than the reality. "Actually asked me to attend and said my technical expertise would be valuable for the station's representation. He apparently thought having me there would demonstrate our commitment to cross platform coordination and innovation."

The lie expanded naturally, filling in details that made Vincent look more valued and more like someone whose presence was requested rather than merely tolerated.

There was a pause on the other end of the line, long enough that Vox wondered if Alastor had caught the exaggeration. When he spoke again, his tone was carefully neutral.

"How generous of him. And your accommodations? You've booked a room at the hotel?"

The question hit Vox like cold water.

"Yes." The affirmation came out slightly strangled, his brain scrambling to decide how to handle this. "Same hotel, everything coordinated."

Which was a complete lie. He hadn't booked anything yet, hadn't even confirmed which hotel they were staying at, had been operating under the vague assumption that he'd figure it out when he got there. Hotels had rooms, you showed up and requested one, they gave you a key. How complicated could it be?

But admitting that felt wrong somehow, would reveal that he was operating without a plan or proper preparation, just throwing himself at this trip and hoping it worked out. Worse, it might prompt questions about how he was paying for everything, about why he hadn't coordinated through official channels, about the financial arrangements that would expose his usage of David's component budget.

Better to just confirm he had it handled and deal with the actual logistics later.

"Good." Alastor sounded satisfied with the answer. "The hotel fills up quickly during symposium week. I was concerned you might have difficulty securing a room on short notice."

"No difficulty at all," Vox said, the lie becoming easier with repetition. "All sorted."

His mind was already racing ahead though, trying to parse the implications. If Margaret was attending, and she definitely seemed to be attending based on their earlier conversation, then she must have accommodations arranged. The station had to be covering her expenses, right? She worked in advertising coordination, this was literally her job, they wouldn't make her pay her own way.

But if the station was willing to pay for Margaret's attendance, why had they refused to pay for his? What made her presence more valuable than his? The inequality stung, settling in his chest with bitter weight.

Vox filed that question away for later investigation. Not relevant to the current conversation, not something he could ask Alastor without revealing his own financial irregularities.

"...coordinate the morning departure time," Alastor was saying, his voice pulling Vox back from his spiraling thoughts.

"Huh?" Vox blinked, realizing he'd completely lost track of the conversation. "Sorry, what was that?"

A pause on the other side was long enough to communicate annoyance. When Alastor spoke again, his tone had developed an edge. "I was explaining the schedule. The technical staff and setup crew are leaving Wednesday to handle equipment installation and preliminary testing. The rest of us depart Thursday morning."

"Oh. Right. Thursday." Vox processed this information, cataloging it properly this time. "I'm traveling with Margaret actually. She mentioned taking the early train."

"I see." Another pause, this one harder to interpret. "Well. That's convenient for coordination purposes."

The flatness in Alastor's voice suggested he found nothing particularly convenient about this arrangement, but Vox couldn't parse what the actual objection might be. Was he annoyed that Vox would be traveling with someone else instead of coordinating with the radio station group? Did he care at all about travel logistics beyond basic scheduling?

"Is that all you wanted to ask?" Vox heard himself saying before Alastor could end the conversation. The desperate edge in his own voice was embarrassing but he couldn't quite suppress it. "About the hotel and the schedule?"

"Yes, that's about it." Alastor's tone had shifted into something more dismissive, clearly preparing to conclude the call. "I'm sure we'll have opportunities to discuss technical matters once we arrive in Hartford. Until then, I should let you get back to your evening."

"Wait." The word came out too forceful, too obviously desperate. Vox scrambled for something, anything that would justify keeping Alastor on the line. "When exactly are you leaving? What time Thursday morning?"

"The train departs at nine. We should arrive in Hartford by early afternoon, which allows time to settle in before the evening reception."

"Evening reception?" This was the first Vox had heard about any reception, his lack of actual information about the symposium schedule becoming increasingly apparent.

"The opening mixer. Standard industry event practice, allows attendees to network before the formal sessions begin Friday morning." Alastor's patience was clearly wearing thin, his explanations becoming more clipped. "Is there anything else you need to know that isn't covered in the symposium materials you should have received?"

The implication that Vox should already know these things hung heavy in the question. Of course there were symposium materials. Of course there was a formal schedule distributed to attendees. Of course Vox hadn't received any of it because he'd inserted himself into this event through sheer force of will rather than proper official channels.

"No, I'm all set," Vox lied smoothly. "Just confirming details. Making sure everything's coordinated."

"Wonderful. Then if there's nothing else, I really should be going. It's getting late and I have preparations to handle before the trip."

Vox could hear the finality in Alastor's tone, the clear signal that this conversation was ending whether Vox wanted it to or not. But something in him rebelled against that dismissal, refused to let go quite yet.

"So what are you doing right now?" The question emerged before his brain could stop it, casual and intrusive in equal measure.

The silence that followed was profound and uncomfortable.

"I'm..." Alastor's voice carried genuine confusion mixed with something that might have been disbelief. "I was about to go to bed. Which is why I'm trying to end this conversation. Are you going to let me do that, or should I expect more questions about my evening activities?"

The dryness of the answer should have been enough to make Vox back off. Should have been the social cue that normal people would recognize as time to apologize and hang up.

"Did you pack already?" Vox heard himself ask instead.

Another pause, longer this time. When Alastor spoke again, his voice was strangely patient, as if dealing with a child who refused to understand basic concepts.

"Not yet. I'll pack tomorrow evening after work. Now, if you're quite finished interrogating me about my personal routines..."

"I'm surprised you're not already packed," Vox interrupted, his tone shifting into something more conversational despite Alastor's clear irritation. "I figured you'd have everything ready a week in advance. Organized and labeled and perfectly arranged."

"I'm attending a professional symposium, Vincent, not planning a military campaign. And I'm not particularly excited about four days of tedious networking and equipment demonstrations, so no, I haven't been counting down the days with packed suitcases."

The statement was clearly meant to be deflating, to communicate that Hartford held no special significance beyond routine professional obligation. But something in the phrasing caught Vox's attention, made him smile despite Alastor's obvious annoyance.

"Whatever you say." Vox let amusement color his voice, warm and knowing in ways that would probably irritate Alastor further. "Are you in bed already? Or are you still-"

"Good night, Whittman." The words came out sharp and decisive, cutting through Vox's question with the finality of a door slamming. "I'll see you in Hartford."

"Good night!" Vox injected as much cheerfulness as possible into his voice, deliberately misreading Alastor's irritation as playful banter. "Sleep well. Don't let the bedbugs bite. Sweet dreams and..."

The line went dead with an audible click, Alastor having hung up before Vox could finish his increasingly ridiculous well wishes.

Vox sat there holding the receiver for a moment, listening to the dial tone, a smile spreading across his face despite the abrupt termination of the call.

Alastor had called him, had initiated contact, had stayed on the line even when clearly wanting to escape. Had answered questions about his schedule and his packing and his bedtime routine with increasing exasperation but had answered them nonetheless.

The conversation had been awkward and disjointed and had probably annoyed Alastor immensely, but it had happened and that was what mattered.

Vox finally replaced the receiver in its cradle, his mind already racing ahead to Tuesday's plans. He needed to coordinate with David about the project status, needed to finalize travel arrangements with Margaret, needed to make sure nothing would fall apart during his four day absence.

He stood, stretching muscles that had tensed during the phone conversation, and moved toward the bed with its rumpled sheets. Sleep came easier than expected, his mind finally quiet enough to rest now that the logistical anxiety had been temporarily addressed through Alastor's call.

Tomorrow he'd deal with everything he needed to deal with, but tonight, he could just enjoy the lingering satisfaction of having kept Alastor on the phone for ten full minutes despite obvious attempts to escape.

Small victories were still victories.

- - -

Tuesday morning arrived with gray skies threatening snow that probably wouldn't fall. Vox dressed with more care than usual, selecting clothes that made him look professional and competent, someone who definitely had his financial affairs in order and wasn't currently bleeding his own project budget dry.

The morning at the station passed in routine chaos, weather maps and pressure systems and the usual demands on his attention. But his mind kept drifting to the lunch meeting he'd scheduled with David before heading to work, to the conversation he needed to have about project status and timeline and definitely not about payment schedules.

At eleven forty five, Vox grabbed his coat and headed out, navigating the city's midday crowds toward the small café where David had agreed to meet. The place was cheap and

loud, the kind of establishment where people could have conversations without being overheard or remembered.

David was already there when Vox arrived, sitting at a corner table with a coffee that looked half finished. He looked marginally better than the last time they'd met, less like he was actively dying from sleep deprivation, though the dark circles under his eyes suggested his sleeping schedule remained questionable.

"Vincent." David's greeting was warm but tired, his smile genuine despite the obvious exhaustion. "Thanks for making time to meet. I know you're busy with your own work."

"Of course." Vox slid into the seat across from him, signaling the waitress for coffee. "I wanted to check in before I'm away for a few days. Make sure everything's on track with the project, that you have everything you need."

"Away?" David's eyebrows rose with curiosity. "Going somewhere?"

"Will be in Hartford for four days." Vox kept his tone casual, like this was routine business travel rather than personal obsession made manifest. "Professional development opportunity that came up unexpectedly. I'll be completely unavailable during that time, so I need to make sure you're set up to work independently if needed."

David nodded slowly, processing this information. "That's fine. I've been making good progress on the next phase anyway. The signal processing stage is coming together faster than anticipated. The mathematics are more elegant than I expected once I started working through the actual implementation."

Relief flooded through Vox's chest. Progress without problems, exactly what he needed to hear.

"Show me where you're at." Vox leaned forward, genuinely interested now. "What's the current inventory situation? Do you have enough materials to keep working while I'm gone?"

David pulled out a small notebook from his jacket pocket, flipping it open to reveal pages covered in neat handwriting and technical sketches. "I've got sufficient components for the initial assembly of the signal processor. The specialized vacuum tubes I sourced last month are holding up well in testing, and the transformer specifications are working exactly as predicted."

He traced a finger down one of his lists, his expression shifting into something more technical and focused. "The only potential issue is the capacitor bank. I'm using more of them than originally planned because the voltage regulation requirements ended up being stricter than the initial calculations suggested. But I've got enough to finish this stage, just might run low if we need to do extensive troubleshooting."

Vox made mental notes, cataloging the information for future reference. "How many more capacitors would you need to have comfortable buffer for troubleshooting?"

"Maybe a dozen? They're not expensive, maybe a dollar each for the specifications we need. But I can work around limitations if necessary, just might mean more careful testing to avoid burning through components."

"No, get the capacitors. I want you to have everything you need to work efficiently, not limp along rationing supplies." Vox kept his voice confident even as his mind calculated how much more he'd need to divert from the depleting budget. "Anything else running low?"

They went through the inventory systematically, David calling out components and quantities while Vox listened and made mental calculations about costs and availability. Nothing sounded prohibitively expensive individually, but the cumulative totals were starting to add up in ways that made Vox's financial decisions seem increasingly reckless.

He really needed to figure out how to replenish the budget before David noticed discrepancies.

"Oh, and speaking of money." David's tone shifted into something more awkward, his eyes not quite meeting Vox's as he flipped to a different page in his notebook. "I hate to bring this up, I know you've got a lot going on. But the payment schedule. I'm coming up on rent this week and my landlord is not particularly flexible about late payments."

The bottom dropped out of Vox's stomach.

"Right. Yes. Payment." Vox forced his voice to stay calm, like he definitely remembered this and had definitely been planning for it. "How much are we talking about for this cycle?"

David checked his notes, his finger finding the relevant line. "Based on the hours logged and the rate we agreed on, it comes to about two hundred dollars. Which I know is significant, but the work has been pretty intensive. I've been pulling ten to twelve hour days most of this month to stay on schedule."

Two hundred dollars. Vox had maybe two hundred and fifty left in the envelope after his various expenditures on flowers and train tickets and bakery cookies. And he still needed to book a hotel room in Hartford, which would eat up most of what remained even if he found something cheap.

The mathematics were becoming very uncomfortable very quickly.

"Two hundred is absolutely fair for the work you've done," Vox said, his mind racing through options. "The quality has been exceptional and the timeline is exactly what we need. You've earned every dollar."

"So..." David trailed off, the question implicit. When would he actually receive those earned dollars?

Vox needed time. Needed to figure out how to handle the cascading financial disaster he'd created through his own poor planning. Needed to get through Hartford and then deal with this mess properly rather than trying to solve it in a crowded café while David watched him with increasingly concerned attention.

"Let's talk about this when I'm back from Hartford," Vox said, keeping his tone casual and unconcerned. "I've got the payment ready, obviously. Just need to coordinate the transfer and

I'd rather handle that kind of transaction in person when I can focus on it properly. Four days won't make a difference for your rent deadline, right? That's not until the end of the month?"

David's expression cycled through several emotions too quickly to identify individually, settling finally into something between resignation and suspicion. "The rent is due on the thirtieth, so yeah, we've got time. Just wanted to make sure we were on the same page about expectations."

"Absolutely on the same page." Vox leaned back, projecting confidence he absolutely didn't feel. "You'll have your payment when I return. Promise."

The promise felt hollow even as he made it. He had no idea how he'd actually fulfill that commitment, no plan for how to explain to Alastor that he would need to pay more.

That was a conversation he was desperately not looking forward to having.

"Okay then." David closed his notebook, apparently accepting Vox's assurance even if doubt lingered in his expression. "I'll keep working through the signal processing stage while you're gone. If I run into any major problems I'll just pause and wait for your input rather than trying to solve them alone."

"Perfect. That's exactly what I need you to do." Vox felt relief wash over him that this part of the conversation was concluding successfully. "Don't contact me while I'm in Hartford. I'll be completely focused on the symposium and won't have bandwidth for project troubleshooting. Just document any issues you encounter and we'll address them together when I return."

They parted ways outside the café, David heading back home, while Vox stood on the sidewalk trying to calculate exactly how deep the hole he'd dug actually was.

Vox started walking back toward the station, his mind churning through increasingly desperate solutions. He could ask Alastor for an advance on the next payment cycle, claim unexpected expenses had depleted the budget faster than anticipated. That would be humiliating but might work if he framed it correctly.

Or he could find some way to generate actual income in the next few days, though what exactly Vincent Whittman could do to earn two hundred dollars on short notice without his regular salary wasn't immediately clear.

Or he could just continue lying, continue promising payment while hoping something would materialize to actually make good on those promises. That seemed to be his current strategy, such as it was.

Back at the station, he found Margaret at her desk organizing correspondence. She looked up as he approached, her face brightening immediately.

"Vincent! Perfect timing. I wanted to confirm our train arrangements for Thursday."

Vox forced his expression into something warm and enthusiastic despite the anxiety still churning in his stomach. "Yes, absolutely. What time were you planning to leave?"

"I've got tickets for the eight thirty train out of Grand Central. Gets into Hartford around noon, which gives us time to check into the hotel and maybe grab lunch before the evening reception." She pulled a small envelope from her desk drawer, extracting what looked like official travel documents. "I can add your ticket to my reservation if you want, make sure we've got seats together."

The casual mention of tickets and reservations made something tighten in Vox's chest. Margaret had all of this coordinated already, had proper documentation and confirmed accommodations and everything that came with officially sanctioned business travel.

Meanwhile Vox had to rely on lies and improvisation and money he'd stolen from his own project.

"That would be perfect," he said, keeping his voice steady. "Though I should mention I have some errands to run Thursday morning before we leave. Personal things I need to handle,

might take me right up until departure time. So I'll just meet you at the platform rather than coordinating earlier."

The explanation was designed to prevent Margaret from suggesting they share a cab to the station or meet at his apartment beforehand. Keep the boundaries firm, maintain separation between his personal disaster of a living situation and the professional image he needed to project.

Margaret's expression flickered with something that might have been disappointment before settling back into pleasant acceptance. "That's fine. I'll be at the platform by eight fifteen just to be safe. Platform seven, the Hartford line. You can find me there."

"Platform seven. Got it." Vox made a mental note, cataloging the information properly this time. "And your hotel arrangements are all set? You've got a room confirmed?"

"Oh yes, the station booked everything weeks ago. It's one of the nicer places actually. They've got a special rate for symposium attendees so the rooms are quite reasonable." She paused, her expression becoming slightly concerned. "Did you get your reservation sorted out?"

The question was innocent enough, genuine concern about logistics rather than any suspicious probing. But it hit Vox with uncomfortable force anyway.

"All sorted," he lied smoothly, the words coming easily now after so much practice. "Same hotel, everything coordinated. I'll probably see you at check in actually."

Margaret smiled, relief evident in her expression. "Wonderful. It'll be nice having you there. These industry events can be rather overwhelming when you're attending alone."

They talked for a few more minutes about the symposium schedule and what sessions Margaret was most interested in attending, her enthusiasm genuine and infectious.

Finally he excused himself, citing work that needed attention before the trip. Margaret accepted the explanation with her usual grace, returning to her correspondence while Vox retreated to his own desk.

David needed payment he couldn't provide. Margaret expected him to have hotel reservations he hadn't made. Alastor thought he had legitimate arrangements. Mrs. Kowalski was going to be checking on him regularly to make sure he didn't die from basic life incompetence.

The web of deceptions was getting complex enough that tracking them all required active mental effort. One wrong word to the wrong person and the whole thing would unravel spectacularly.

Chapter 51

The sports department occupied a corner of the newsroom that smelled perpetually of cigarette smoke, its walls decorated with team photographs and championship pennants that spoke of athletic achievements Vox couldn't care less about in the moment. The desks were arranged in casual clusters rather than the rigid rows that characterized the news side, their occupants maintaining the kind of loose camaraderie that came from covering games instead of disasters.

Vox navigated through the space with his weather maps and notes clutched under one arm, searching for Paul among the various men hunched over typewriters or engaged in animated discussions about yesterday's game.

He found him near the back, feet propped on his desk, reading what looked like a racing form. Paul was younger than others in the sports department, maybe late thirties, with the build of someone who'd played sports in college before settling into the considerably less athletic profession of writing about other people playing them.

"Paul?" Vox approached with what he hoped was appropriate professional friendliness.

Paul looked up from his papers, his expression cycling from mild curiosity to recognition to something that might have been resignation. "That's me. You must be Whittman. Sterling said you'd be coming by to explain the weather thing."

"Right. Yes. I wanted to make sure you're comfortable with the forecast procedures before I leave tomorrow." Vox set his materials down on the corner of Paul's desk, careful not to disturb the racing form or the coffee cup that looked like it had been there since yesterday. "It's really not complicated once you understand the basic patterns, but there are some nuances that can trip people up if they're not familiar with meteorological systems."

Paul's expression suggested he found the word meteorological unnecessarily fancy.

"Look, Whittman, I appreciate you trying to help and all, but Sterling already gave me the rundown. Check the teletype, read whatever it says, maybe add a bit of local flavor if the mood strikes. Not exactly rocket science." Paul gestured vaguely at Vox's carefully organized notes with the corner of his racing form. "I've been filling in for the weather guys since the station opened. I know how to point at a map just fine."

The casual dismissal made something tighten in Vox's chest. It was a reminder of how much he'd had to debase himself at the beginning of his career just to get this far. He was currently trapped in the station's most exhausting hybrid role. He was expected to spend hours in the back room decoding raw numerical strings from the loud, clattering teletype, manually plotting every isobar and cold front, and then without a break step under the hot lights to present it all with a smile. And it didn't help that his salary did not reflect this in the slightest.

When he'd first started working here, he had spent six months in a grueling, station mandated apprenticeship, a requirement Sterling had insisted upon because Vincent lacked the military meteorology background most of the older weathermen had. He'd spent hours in a windowless room with the station's previous forecaster, mastering the Weather Bureau Correspondence Course just to earn a certificate that was currently in his employee file in Sterling's desk drawer.

He hated the science. He didn't care about thermodynamic gradients or the physics of air mass displacement. He hated the charcoal dust under his fingernails and the way his eyes burned from staring at the flickering ticker. But he did care about the way the lights hit the board and the way the pointer felt like a scepter. He yearned for the day the promotion would finally move him into the proper News block permanently like it had back then. He wanted to stop being the meteorologist and the anchor and just do the latter. He missed being the man who simply arrived, looked perfect, and commanded the room while some intern or junior hire handled the mess of maps, and later, scripts for him.

It was insulting that Paul thought it was just reading.

"It's about the delivery, Paul," Vox said, his voice carrying an authoritative weight that was just a half step too severe for a junior staffer. "The Weather Bureau provides the numbers, but if you deliver them like you're reading a grocery list, the audience switches to the other channel. They want to feel like the man in the suit knows what's coming."

Paul's eyebrows rose fractionally, his expression shifting into something between amusement and skepticism. "You take this pretty seriously, huh?"

"Of course I take it seriously. People make decisions based on the weather forecast. Farmers planning their work, construction companies scheduling projects, families deciding whether to travel. If I give them inaccurate information, they could make choices that cost them money or time or worse." Vox heard his voice rising slightly with intensity, felt himself leaning forward as he spoke. "This isn't just entertainment, it's a service that people depend on."

Paul stared at him for a long moment, his racing form now completely forgotten. When he spoke again, his tone had shifted into something more careful, like he was dealing with someone whose stability he was beginning to question.

"Okay. Sure. Weather is important. I get that." He paused, then added with deliberate casualness, "But I'm only covering for you for four days, right? Thursday through Sunday? It's not like I'm taking over your job permanently."

"Four days where conditions could change rapidly," Vox pressed, unable to let it go despite Paul's obvious desire to minimize the significance. "We're heading into a period where winter systems are becoming more active. Cold fronts moving down from the north, moisture coming up from the coast. The potential for significant precipitation events is increasing daily and if you're not monitoring the right indicators you won't see them coming until it's too late."

Paul set down his racing form completely now, his full attention on Vox in a way that suggested growing concern rather than professional interest. "Listen, pal. I appreciate the thoroughness, I really do. But you're talking to me like I'm about to launch missiles based on cloud formations. It's just the weather segment. Two minutes on air, maybe three if I really stretch it out. People aren't going to die if I get it wrong."

"They might!" Vox heard himself saying before he could stop it. "If you tell them the roads will be clear when actually there's going to be ice, if you say it's safe to travel when really there's a blizzard coming, if you miss the signs of a major storm system because you didn't think it was important enough to pay attention to the details, then yes, people could absolutely die!"

The silence that followed was profound and uncomfortable. Several other people in the sports department had stopped their conversations, their attention drawn by Vox's rising volume.

Paul leaned back in his chair, his hands coming up in a placating gesture. "Okay. Deep breath there, Whittman. I hear you. Weather is serious business. Life and death stuff. Got it."

His tone suggested he thought Vox was completely unhinged but was too polite to say so directly.

Vox felt heat rise to his face, embarrassment mixing with frustration in uncomfortable combination. He was being ridiculous, he knew he was being ridiculous but he couldn't seem to stop himself from continuing to be ridiculous. He knew he didn't care about the weather or whether people died because of said weather. He just couldn't stand his work being minimized like this.

"I just need to make sure you understand the systems," he said, trying to moderate his voice back to something approaching normal professional concern. "That you know how to read the maps properly, how to interpret the data, how to present the information in ways that people can actually use. I'm leaving you four days worth of data but this is just an educated guess. This data will definitely change, and you need to apply the changes accordingly."

"Sure, sure." Paul was nodding along now, his expression suggesting he'd decided the best strategy was just agreeing until Vox went away. "Why don't you show me these maps you've got there. Walk me through what I need to know."

Vox spread his materials across Paul's desk, pushing aside the racing form and several other papers to make room. The weather maps he'd prepared showed current conditions, projected systems moving into the region, areas of concern that would need monitoring over the next few days.

"This is the current high pressure system sitting over the lakes," Vox began, his finger tracing the isobaric lines on the map. "It's stable now but starting to weaken, which means it's going to move east over the next forty eight hours. When it does, it's going to interact with this low

pressure trough coming up from the south, and that interaction is what's going to determine whether we get rain or snow or some combination of both."

Paul squinted at the map, his expression suggesting he was trying to follow along but finding the level of detail overwhelming. "Okay. High pressure, low pressure, they fight, we get weather. Got it."

"It's not fighting, it's thermodynamic interaction based on pressure differentials and moisture content." Vox heard himself slipping into technical language, couldn't quite stop despite knowing it was making Paul's eyes glaze over.

"Right. Thermodynamic interaction. That's the one." Paul's attention had already started drifting back toward his racing form.

Vox felt frustration spike again, sharp and immediate. This was important. It mattered more than his stupid sports segment. Why couldn't Paul see that? Why was everyone always so casual about things that actually required care and attention?

"Are you even listening?" The question came out sharper than intended, making Paul's expression shift from patient tolerance to something harder.

"Yeah, I'm listening." Paul's voice had lost its earlier friendliness, developing an edge. "I'm listening to you explain weather patterns like I'm studying for a PhD instead of just filling in for a few days. And honestly, Whittman, you need to relax. This isn't that serious."

"It is serious to me." Vox heard the defensive note in his own voice, hated it but couldn't suppress it. "It's my responsibility to make sure it's handled properly while I'm gone."

"Okay, but here's the thing." Paul leaned forward now, his posture becoming more confrontational. "You're not my boss. Sterling is my boss. And Sterling told me to read the weather service reports and deliver them on air. That's it. That's the job. He didn't tell me to become a meteorologist or to worry about thermodynamic interactions or any of this other stuff you're going on about."

The words hit Vox with unexpected force, sharp and uncomfortable.

"If there's some critical situation that comes up, some actual emergency weather event, Sterling will handle it. He'll bring in a proper expert, someone from the weather service or whatever. But for four days of normal forecasting? I'm just going to read what the reports say and call it done. And you know what? That's going to be fine. The station isn't going to burn down. People aren't going to die. The world will keep turning."

Paul picked up his racing form again, the gesture deliberately dismissive. "So I appreciate you bringing all this stuff by, I really do. Shows you care about your work and that's admirable. But I don't need a three hour seminar on cloud formations. I just need the basic information so I can do the minimum required to keep Sterling off my back for four days."

Vox stood there holding his weather maps, feeling increasingly foolish as Paul's words sank in. He'd been taking this too seriously. Had been projecting his own anxieties about the Hartford trip onto the weather coverage, trying to maintain control over something when everything else felt like it was spiraling.

"You're right," he said finally. "I'm being excessive. I just wanted to make sure everything would be handled properly."

"And it will be." Paul's tone had softened slightly, apparently satisfied that his message had landed. "Look, I know you care about this job. That's good. But you're going to Hartford for professional development, right? That's a good thing too. You should be excited about that opportunity instead of stressed about what's happening here while you're gone."

"Right." Vox gathered his maps with movements that felt mechanical, his earlier energy completely deflated. "I'll just leave these here in case you need them for reference. The basic forecast structure is pretty straightforward once you see the pattern."

"Sure thing." Paul was already returning his attention to the racing form, clearly considering this conversation concluded. "Have a good trip, Whittman. Try to relax a little while you're there. You seem pretty wound up."

Vox left the sports department with his pride somewhat battered and his anxiety about the trip still churning in his stomach. Paul was right, obviously. The weather coverage would be fine. Sterling wouldn't let the station's forecast quality deteriorate just because Vox was gone for four days.

But acknowledging that meant acknowledging that he wasn't as essential as he wanted to believe, that his job could be covered by someone who treated it casually and everything would probably work out fine anyway. That his careful preparation and meticulous attention to detail wasn't actually as necessary as he'd convinced himself.

The realization sat uncomfortably as he returned to his own desk, settling into his chair with the kind of defeated slump that suggested the entire interaction had gone worse than he'd hoped.

Margaret glanced over from her own work, her expression shifting to concern. "Everything alright? You look upset."

"Fine. Just finished the handover with Paul. He's all set to cover the weather while I'm gone." Vox tried to inject some enthusiasm into his voice and failed completely. "He seems pretty capable. Definitely doesn't need my help or guidance or anything I was trying to provide."

"I'm sure he appreciates your thoroughness even if he doesn't show it." Margaret's tone was soothing. "You care about your work and that's admirable. Not everyone takes their responsibilities as seriously as you do."

The reassurance felt hollow but Vox accepted it anyway, nodding as his mind drifted to other concerns.

The afternoon crawled past with painful slowness, routine tasks feeling more tedious than usual now that his attention was already in Hartford.

Sterling called him into the office around three, the tone of his voice suggesting this was something more significant than routine coordination.

Vox knocked on the doorframe, waiting for permission before entering.

"Whittman. Come in, close the door." Sterling gestured to the chair across from his desk, his expression unreadable. "I wanted to talk to you before you head out tomorrow."

Vox settled into the chair, his stomach tightening with anticipation. This could be anything from encouragement about the trip to termination. With Sterling, he never quite knew.

"I talked to Paul just now," Sterling began, leaning back in his chair like he was about to deliver feedback. "He mentioned you came by to do a handover. Said you were very thorough. Maybe a little too detailed."

Heat rose to Vox's face. "I wanted to make sure he had all the information he needed."

"Yes, he got that impression." Sterling's mouth quirked into something that might have been amusement. "Also got the impression you think the weather forecast is a matter of life and death."

"It's an important responsibility," Vox said, defensive despite knowing he was just digging himself deeper. "People rely on accurate forecasts."

"Sure they do. But Paul's been doing fill in weather for two years and we haven't had any disasters yet. He knows how to read a report and deliver it on camera." Sterling paused, his expression becoming more serious. "Look, I appreciate that you take your job seriously. That's good. That's exactly the kind of attitude I want from my staff. But you can't control everything, Whittman. Sometimes you just have to trust that other people can handle things without your direct supervision."

The words echoed what Paul had said earlier, landing with the same uncomfortable truth.

"I know that," Vox said. "I just wanted everything to go smoothly while I was gone."

"And it will. Because Paul is competent enough to handle weather for four days, and because I'll be here to step in if anything actually goes wrong." Sterling leaned forward, his tone shifting into something more encouraging. "Son, you're going to Hartford to represent the television station at a major industry event. That's significant. That's an opportunity most people at your level don't get. So instead of worrying about what's happening here, focus on making the most of that opportunity."

Sterling pulled a cigar from his desk drawer, taking his time clipping the end. He didn't light it, just rolled it between his fingers while he studied Vox with an expression that suggested he was about to say something he'd been holding back.

"Speaking of Hartford," Sterling said slowly, his tone shifting into something more calculated. "I've been hearing some interesting rumors about what the radio people are working on over there. New technology that could change how we think about broadcasting."

Vox felt his stomach drop, his mind immediately racing to the transmitter project. Had someone at the radio station been talking? Had Alastor mentioned something in passing that had gotten back to Sterling through the administrative channels? How much did Sterling know?

"What kind of developments?" Vox kept his voice carefully neutral, his face arranged into polite curiosity rather than the panic currently flooding his nervous system.

"That's what I'm hoping you can find out." Sterling set the cigar down on his desk, leaning forward with the focus of someone making a serious proposition. "You're going to be at this symposium for four days, rubbing elbows with the radio station's technical staff, seeing their equipment demonstrations. I need you to keep your eyes and ears open. Find out what they're working on, what innovations they're planning, what gives them an edge we might want to replicate on the television side."

The request was perfectly reasonable on the surface, standard corporate intelligence gathering at an industry event. But the timing made Vox's skin prickle with alarm. If Sterling was

asking about radio innovations right before Vox left for Hartford with Alastor, either it was pure coincidence or someone had leaked information about the transmitter project.

"I can certainly pay attention to the technical demonstrations," Vox said carefully, trying to feel out how much Sterling actually knew. "Is there something specific you've heard about? Some particular technology I should be looking for?"

Sterling waved his hand vaguely. "Nothing concrete. Just whispers that they're developing something significant, something that could give them a real advantage in the broadcast market. Could be nothing. Could be exaggeration. But I'd rather know what we're up against than be caught flat footed when they roll out something revolutionary and we're left scrambling to catch up."

The relief was immediate. Sterling didn't know about the portable transmitter specifically. He'd just heard general rumors about radio station innovations, the kind of vague industry gossip that circulated constantly at these events.

But Vox's relief was short lived as the implications sank in. Sterling wanted him to spy on the radio station's technical developments. Which meant if Vox reported back about the portable transmitter, he'd be exposing his own secret project to his employer at the television station.

And underneath all of that was the looming financial disaster. The component budget he'd wasted for personal expenses, the payment he owed David that he couldn't make, the hotel room he still needed to book with money he technically didn't have.

"Here's what I'm thinking," Sterling continued, apparently mistaking Vox's silence for contemplation rather than mounting panic. "You do this for me, you find out what the radio people are really working on, and I'll cover all your expenses for the Hartford trip. Hotel, meals, transportation, everything. Consider it compensation for services rendered. Fair trade for valuable intelligence."

The offer landed like a lifeline thrown to a drowning man. Sterling would fund the entire trip if Vox agreed to spy on the radio station. Which would solve his immediate financial crisis, would give him enough money to pay David when he returned.

But it would also put him in an impossible position. He'd have to either sabotage his own project by revealing the transmitter project to Sterling, or lie to Sterling about what he'd learned, or somehow manufacture a fake lead convincing enough to satisfy Sterling's curiosity without exposing the real work.

Vox's mind raced through the options, each one worse than the last.

He could agree to spy and then feed Sterling complete nonsense. Tell him the radio station was working on some ridiculous technical innovation that would keep the television side distracted while he finished the real project for Alastor. But if Sterling investigated and found out Vox had lied, that would destroy any trust and probably get him fired for a manufactured reason.

He could try to find who at the radio station had been talking, use the Hartford trip to identify the leak and somehow expose them to Alastor and let him handle it accordingly, before Sterling got more detailed information. But that assumed there actually was a leak rather than just general industry rumors, and Vox had no idea how he'd even begin that kind of investigation.

Or he could take Sterling's money and use it to fund David's actual component needs. Essentially tax Sterling to build Alastor's weapon, tell Sterling he was buying intelligence when really he was buying the vacuum tubes and capacitors the project desperately needed. It was embezzlement with extra steps, but at least it solved the immediate financial crisis.

"I need to be careful about how I approach it," Vox said slowly, buying time to think. "If the radio people realize I'm actively spying on their technical developments, they'll shut me out completely. It would have to be subtle."

Sterling's expression shifted into approval. "Exactly what I was thinking. You're good at that kind of thing, Whittman. The friendly approach, getting people to open up. I've seen how you handle client relations. This is the same skill set, just applied to competitive intelligence instead of advertising."

The comparison made Vox's skin crawl but he forced himself to nod agreement. "It might take longer than four days. Can't rush this kind of thing without raising suspicion."

"Take whatever time you need. Just bring me back something useful." Sterling pulled out his wallet, extracting several bills and sliding them across the desk. "Here's an advance for immediate expenses. Get yourself a proper hotel room, eat some decent meals. I'll reimburse the rest when you get back and give me your report."

Vox stared at the money on Sterling's desk, his mind still churning through implications. This was wrong on so many levels he'd lost count. Taking money to spy on a project he was actively helping to build, lying to his employer about his intentions, continuing to embezzle from the component budget just through a different mechanism. He was a snake eating its own tail.

But the alternative was admitting that he couldn't pay the engineer currently building revolutionary technology because he'd spent the budget on flowers and train tickets.

Vox reached across the desk and took the money, folding the bills carefully and tucking them into his pocket. "I'll do my best to find out what they're working on. No promises about what I'll discover, but I'll keep my eyes open and my ears to the ground."

"That's all I'm asking." Sterling's smile had widened, clearly pleased with himself for securing Vox's cooperation. "This stays between us, obviously. I don't want word getting back to the radio station that we're actively investigating their technical developments. Professional courtesy and all that."

"Of course. Complete discretion." Vox stood, the money in his wallet feeling heavier than it should. "I should get going. Still have packing to finish before tomorrow morning."

"Go, go. Have a good trip." Sterling's expression had shifted into something more serious. "I'm trusting you with this. Don't make me regret it."

The warning was clear enough. Vox nodded once and left the office.

Margaret had already left for the day, her desk neat and organized, a small note propped against her typewriter reminding him about tomorrow's train departure time. Vox stared at the note without really seeing it, his thoughts spiraling through increasingly desperate scenarios.

He could still back out. Could tell Sterling tomorrow morning that he'd changed his mind, that he didn't feel comfortable spying on professional colleagues. But that would mean giving up the expense money, would mean being right back in the financial hole he'd been desperately trying to climb out of.

He could tell Alastor what Sterling had asked him to do, come clean about the whole situation and hope Alastor would understand or at least not murder him immediately. But that conversation would require admitting he'd wasted the component budget, and not wanting to admit that was the whole reason he was considering Sterling's offer in the first place.

The afternoon passed in a blur of mounting anxiety. At four thirty, Vox gathered his things and left the station before anyone could corner him with additional complications or questions.

The walk home took him past a newsstand displaying the evening papers, their headlines visible through the grimy window. Vox stopped without consciously deciding to, his attention caught by the familiar format of the local news section.

He should keep walking. Should go home and finish packing and try to get some sleep before tomorrow's early departure. The news would still be there in the morning, whatever it contained could wait.

But his feet carried him into the newsstand anyway, his hands reaching for a copy of the evening edition before his brain fully processed the decision.

The missing person story was on page four, a small column that had been relegated from its earlier prominent position. Vox's eyes scanned the text quickly.

No body found and no new leads in the disappearance. Police were continuing their investigation but had no concrete evidence of foul play. Family was offering a reward for

information. The usual elements of a missing person case that was slowly fading from public attention as days passed without resolution.

Vox stared at the article, his mind churning through implications despite his best efforts to remain rational.

The timing still aligned with Alastor's potential involvement. The lack of a body suggested careful disposal, methodical planning that would characterize someone who'd been getting away with murder for years. The absence of evidence pointed to either complete competence or complete innocence, and Vox's paranoid brain was having difficulty distinguishing between those possibilities.

He paid for the paper with coins from his pocket, folding it carefully and tucking it under his arm as he left the newsstand. The late afternoon sun was already fading toward evening, winter darkness coming early as it always did this time of year.

The walk home felt longer than usual, his thoughts spiraling through increasingly paranoid scenarios. Tomorrow he'd be getting on a train with Alastor. Would be spending four days in close proximity to someone who might be a murderer, might have just killed someone less than two weeks ago, might view Vox's presence as opportunity or threat depending on factors Vox couldn't predict or control.

And now he was also supposed to be spying on that same person for Sterling, gathering intelligence about technical projects while actively helping to build them, maintaining an impossible web of lies that would eventually collapse under its own weight.

Back in his apartment, he collapsed into his armchair without bothering to turn on lights, letting the evening shadows fill the space while his mind continued its paranoid spiral. The newspaper sat on his lap, the article about the missing man burning into his awareness like a physical weight.

He should throw it away. Should stop obsessing over missing persons reports and murder investigations and all the other paranoid fixations that were consuming energy he needed for actually productive activities. Should focus on Hartford rather than spiraling into worst case scenarios about what Alastor might or might not have done.

But the newspaper stayed on his lap, his fingers occasionally smoothing the creased pages, his eyes drifting back to the article even as he tried to focus on other things.

The fish tank bubbled its constant rhythm, the guppies swimming their oblivious circles. Vox watched them for a while, envying their simplicity, their complete lack of awareness about actual predators and danger and the complicated calculations required to navigate a world full of threats. The smaller one thought the bigger guppy was the threat but it couldn't even fathom the existence of sharks.

Eventually the darkness became too complete to see properly and he forced himself up to turn on lights, to start the practical tasks that needed handling before tomorrow.

Vox opened the suitcase on his bed for one final check, examining the contents with critical attention. Everything looked proper at first glance, his shirts folded neatly, his pants arranged to minimize wrinkles, his better shoes positioned carefully to avoid crushing other items.

But something felt wrong. Some nagging sense that he was missing something important, some element of preparation that hadn't been adequately addressed.

The earlier thoughts resurfaced. He was going to Hartford with someone who might be a killer, was putting himself in situations where he'd be vulnerable and isolated. And he had nothing, no weapon or defensive tool, no way to protect himself if things went sideways in ways he couldn't predict.

The paranoia was almost certainly excessive. Alastor had no reason to harm him, plenty of reasons to keep him alive and productive and working on the transmitter project. The entire arrangement depended on Vox remaining available and functional.

But paranoia didn't respond well to logical argument, and the thought of being completely defenseless in unfamiliar territory kept nagging at his awareness.

Vox walked to his kitchen area, opening the drawer where he kept his limited collection of utensils. Spoons and forks jumbled together with serving implements he'd never used, a can opener that barely worked, various pieces of equipment that had probably come with the apartment and never been replaced.

And at the back, a kitchen knife that looked sharper than it probably was, its blade maybe six inches long, its handle wrapped in tape someone had applied years ago to cover a crack.

He picked it up, testing its weight, feeling simultaneously foolish and justified. What exactly did he think he was going to do with a kitchen knife? Defend himself against Alastor if things got dangerous? The image was absurd, Vincent Whittman rifling through his suitcase and pulling a dull kitchen knife during some confrontation, as if that would somehow improve his position rather than just making everything worse.

But having it felt better than not having it. Felt like some kind of preparation, some acknowledgment that he was walking into a situation with unknown variables and should be ready for anything.

Vox wrapped the knife in a spare sock from his dresser, then tucked it into the bottom of his suitcase beneath his folded pants. Deep enough that casual inspection wouldn't reveal it, accessible enough that he could retrieve it if he actually needed it, which he almost certainly wouldn't.

The gesture made him feel slightly more in control of a situation that increasingly felt beyond his ability to manage.

Vox closed the suitcase with decisive finality, securing the clasps with more force than necessary.

The evening stretched ahead with nothing left to fill it. Too early for sleep, too late to start any significant tasks, too anxious to relax. Vox paced his small apartment, his energy needing outlet, his mind refusing to settle.

He ended up at the fish tank again, staring at the two guppies. Tomorrow Mrs. Kowalski would come by to get his key, would take over their care for four days while Vox was in Hartford doing who knows what.

"Try to survive," he told them, his voice sounding tired even to his own ears. "I know you will miss me and you probably won't like the old hag but that doesn't mean you have to die. That's all I ask."

The fish continued their circuit, offering no acknowledgment of these instructions.

Vox's hand drifted to his pocket, fingers finding the bills Sterling had given him. The money felt wrong, tainted by the agreement he'd made, but it also felt like salvation from the financial disaster he'd created through his own poor planning.

He could use Sterling's advance to book a proper hotel room. Could use the expense reimbursement to pay David when he returned. Could essentially funnel Sterling's money into Alastor's project while telling Sterling he was gathering intelligence.

The plan was absolutely terrible. But it was also the only plan that solved his immediate problems without requiring him to admit to multiple layers of fraud and deception.

Everything would work out fine. It always did, somehow. He'd go to Hartford, he'd figure out what to tell Sterling, he'd keep the transmitter project moving forward, he'd maintain his various deceptions without letting them collapse catastrophically. He was good at this, had been good at it for decades in hell, managing far more complex situations with far higher stakes.

Tomorrow the train would leave the platform, carrying him toward Hartford and whatever waited there, and all his current anxieties would either prove justified or reveal themselves as paranoid overreaction.

Either way, he'd find out soon enough.

Chapter 52

The platform was already crowded when Vox arrived, his breath coming in short gasps from having practically sprinted the last three blocks after realizing he was running behind schedule.

The morning had started fine, Mrs. Kowalski arriving at his door precisely at seven thirty like she'd promised, her expression cycling through the now familiar combination of concern and judgment as she'd surveyed his apartment one more time before accepting his key.

"You take care of yourself," she'd said, tucking the key into her housecoat pocket carefully, seemingly already mentally preparing for her fish feeding duties. "Don't go getting into any trouble or forgetting to eat proper meals. And when you get back we're having that discussion, young man. This apartment smells worse every time I come in here."

"I'll be fine," Vox had assured her, already edging toward the door with his suitcase, acutely aware of the time ticking away. "Just feed the fish once a day, the amount we discussed. Don't overfeed them. And thank you again for doing this."

"Oh I'll take good care of your dear fishies, don't you worry about that." Mrs. Kowalski had patted his arm with surprising gentleness. "They'll be healthier when you get back than they were when you left, mark my words. Now go on, get to your train. Good luck at your event!"

The walk to Grand Central had taken longer than anticipated, his suitcase heavier than he'd expected despite minimal packing, and by the time he'd navigated through the station's main concourse to find the correct platform, he was convinced he'd missed departure entirely.

But there she was, Margaret standing near the track entrance talking animatedly with Barbara, both women dressed in appropriate traveling clothes. It seemed they'd had considerably more time to prepare than Vox had managed. Alastor lingered nearby, his posture relaxed but somehow separate from their conversation, his attention somewhere else.

Alastor noticed him first, his eyes catching Vox's across the platform, his expression shifting from bored to amused, nodding in greeting.

Vox waved back, the motion probably too enthusiastic given the context but he couldn't quite suppress the surge of energy that came from finally being here, from the trip actually starting instead of just existing as anxious anticipation in the back of his mind. He moved faster, weaving through the other travelers waiting for the train.

"Vincent!" Margaret's face lit up with relief and happiness as he approached. She pulled him into a hug before he could set down his suitcase, her arms wrapping around him. "Oh my god, I thought you weren't going to make it! I was starting to worry that something had happened, that you'd changed your mind about coming or missed your alarm or gotten lost on the way here!"

"We've got twenty more minutes before departure." Vox managed to return the hug one armed, his other hand still gripping his suitcase handle. "Plenty of time. No need for panic."

Margaret pulled back, her expression cycling through relief and residual concern. "I know, I know. I just get anxious about these things. What if the train left early? What if there was some schedule change we didn't know about? What if we got separated and couldn't find each other in the crowd?"

"Well I'm here now, so crisis averted." Vox shifted his suitcase to his other hand, rotating his shoulder to work out the tension from carrying it. "Let's find somewhere to sit before boarding starts."

She didn't move right away. Her gaze lingered on him instead, taking in the slightly rumpled state of his coat, the way his tie sat just a bit off center. "Hold on."

Before he could react, she stepped closer, fingers already at his collar. She straightened his tie with quick, practiced motions, tugging the knot up and smoothing the fabric flat against his chest. Then she reached up, brushing a hand through his hair, returning a few strands back into place. "You look like you ran here."

"I kind of did," Vox said, chin tipping up without protest. There was a faint smugness to him now, something satisfied and self assured as he let her fuss. When she finished, he straightened slightly.

His eyes drifted briefly toward Alastor just to catch his attention and to make sure the moment had been seen. A look meant to say that he'd made it after all, that the trip was real now, that he belonged here. And that he had someone who cared enough to straighten his tie and fix his hair in the middle of a crowded station.

Alastor was already watching.

Not in any obvious way. His expression remained neutral, almost bored, but his gaze didn't shift when Vox met it. Vox held it for a second, then looked off again, the satisfaction settling back, reveling in Alastor's general discomfort with public displays of affection.

Vox found a bench near the platform, Margaret settling beside him while Barbara and Alastor remained standing a few feet away. Margaret pulled out her ticket from her purse, the edges somewhat worn as if she'd already handled it countless times.

"So we're sitting together," she said, tapping at the indicated seat numbers. "I made sure to request adjacent seats when I booked. Though we're not near Barbara and Alastor, they're sitting together further down the car. I think there's about six rows between us? The train was almost fully booked when I made the reservation."

Vox processed this information, his mind immediately mapping out the arrangement. He'd be sitting with Margaret, which was expected and appropriate given they were supposed to be dating. But that also meant being separated from Alastor for the entire journey, stuck in conversation with Margaret while the person he actually wanted to talk to was somewhere down the aisle doing who knows what.

"Though," Margaret's expression had shifted into something more disappointed, her earlier satisfaction fading. "I wish we were closer to them. It would be nice being able to talk during the trip, you know? Share things about Hartford, discuss what sessions we're most excited about attending. Do you think the people near them would swap with us? Maybe if we asked nicely, explained that we'd like to sit with our friends?"

"I don't know." Vox kept his voice neutral, already sensing where this was going and not particularly wanting to encourage it. "People are usually pretty attached to their seat assignments, especially on longer trips like this. But you can try if you want."

Margaret was already standing, her determination overriding any concern about potential rejection. She walked over to a group of people huddled nearby, her posture friendly but apologetic.

Vox couldn't hear what she was saying from this distance, the platform noise and general crowd chatter drowning out her specific words. But he could track the conversation through body language, Margaret gesturing toward the train then back toward where Vox sat, her expression earnest and hopeful.

The response from whoever she was talking to, probably the people already assigned seats near Barbara and Alastor, wasn't visible or audible to Vox. But Margaret's face told him everything he needed to know.

She nodded several times, the gesture carrying too much enthusiasm to be genuine, her voice now loud enough to be heard over the ambient noise. "No no, it's alright! I completely understand. No worries at all, enjoy your trip!"

She returned to the bench, settling back beside Vox with grace despite obvious deflation. "They didn't want to switch. Which is absolutely fine, I get it. They probably have their own reasons for wanting those specific seats."

The train boarding announcement crackled through the platform speakers, distorted and barely intelligible but communicating the essential information that departure was approaching and passengers should begin making their way to their assigned seats.

Margaret gathered her things, her earlier disappointment already being pushed aside. Vox followed her lead, picking up his suitcase and joining the general flow of people moving toward the train.

Their seats were exactly as Margaret had described. Vox sat facing backward while Margaret faced forward, a setup that meant they'd be looking at each other for the entire journey rather than sitting side by side. The positioning felt oddly formal, like they were about to conduct an interview rather than just share travel time.

Vox settled into his seat, shoving his suitcase into the overhead storage with more force than necessary. The fabric was worn but clean, the cushioning adequate if not luxurious. Margaret took the seat across from him, tucking away her purse and coat mindlessly, suggesting she'd traveled by train many times before and had developed specific routines.

"This is nice though," she said once they were settled, her tone brightening with determined optimism. "Having our own little space. We can talk without bothering anyone, spread out a bit. It'll be cozy."

She launched into conversation almost immediately, asking about his morning routine and whether he'd remembered to pack everything he needed and what sessions he was most interested in attending once they arrived in Hartford. Vox provided appropriate responses, his attention engaged enough to maintain the flow but his mind kept drifting toward where Barbara and Alastor were sitting several rows down.

Margaret was equally distracted, he realized after a few minutes of conversation.

"Oh my god, wait!" Margaret's eyes widened suddenly, her hand coming up to her mouth. "That reminds me, I was going to show Barbara that article I cut out from the paper yesterday. The one about the new psychologist approved techniques? She'd be so interested in that, we were just talking about it on the platform and I completely forgot I told her I'd show her the article."

"You could show her now," Vox suggested, trying to keep the hope out of his voice. If Margaret wanted to spend the trip talking to Barbara instead of him, that would solve multiple problems simultaneously.

"Would you mind?" Margaret was already reaching for her purse, her enthusiasm building. "I know we just sat down but it'll only take a minute, I just want to make sure she sees it before we get too settled into the trip and I forget again."

"Go ahead. I'm fine here." Vox gestured toward the aisle.

Margaret stood and moved down the car, her steps careful as the train began its slow acceleration out of the station. Vox watched her disappear around a seat back, presumably arriving at wherever Barbara and Alastor were positioned.

The silence that followed was almost pleasant, the ambient noise of the train and other passengers creating white noise that didn't demand his active attention. Vox let his eyes close briefly, enjoying the rare moment of not having to perform for anyone.

Margaret returned after maybe ten minutes, settling back into her seat, satisfaction radiating off her, suggesting her talk with Barbara had gone well.

"She loved it," Margaret reported, pulling out what looked like vacation photographs from her purse. "And then we got talking about her trip to the shore last summer, and I remembered I told her at the radio station that I'd bring these photos from when my family went to Cape Cod. I should show her those too, she'd really appreciate the scenery."

She was already standing again before Vox could respond, the photographs clutched in her hand as she headed back down the aisle toward Barbara's seat.

This pattern repeated itself several more times over the next hour. Margaret would return to their seats, settle in for what seemed like five minutes, then remember something else she wanted to share with Barbara and disappear again down the aisle. Each absence lasted progressively longer, her apologies upon returning becoming more perfunctory as she clearly struggled between wanting to be polite to Vox and wanting to continue her animated discussion with someone she found more interesting.

"I think I'm bothering Alastor," Margaret said after her fourth or fifth trip down the aisle, her expression carrying genuine concern mixed with slight embarrassment. "Barbara keeps assuring me it's fine but I can see him getting *that* look. You know the one."

Vox felt something electric spike through his chest, opportunity presenting itself with unexpected clarity. "Why don't we just swap seats? She can take my seat here, I'll take hers there. Then you can talk to Barbara as much as you want without having to keep getting up and walking back and forth, and Alastor won't be annoyed either. He is probably *really* bothered at this point."

Margaret's entire face lit up with relief and gratitude, as if Vox had just solved a problem she'd been too polite to articulate directly. "Oh my god, would you really not mind? I didn't want to suggest it because I thought you might take offense, as if I was choosing Barbara over you or something. But if you're actually alright with it, that would be so much easier for everyone involved."

“I don’t mind at all.” Vox was already gathering his things, his movements sharp with barely suppressed eagerness. “You guys probably have more to talk about anyway. All the family vacations and shopping in Hartford and things like that. And us men can talk about our shared interests. Technical developments, broadcast innovations, whatever comes up.”

"Alright, well, let me go ask Barbara if she's alright with it first." Margaret was already moving. "I don't want to just assume she wants me sitting next to her for the entire trip. Maybe she's enjoying Alastor's company."

Vox watched her walk down the aisle again, this time with clear purpose. She reached Barbara's seat and bent down to have what looked like a brief conversation.

Margaret turned back toward Vox, giving him an enthusiastic nod that suggested Barbara had agreed to the arrangement. Vox stood and moved into the aisle with his coat and the newspaper he'd been pretending to read, giving Barbara time to collect her things from what had been her seat.

They passed each other in the narrow aisle, Margaret squeezing past with a grateful smile. "Thank you so much for being understanding about this. You're really the best, you know that?"

"Just want everyone to be comfortable," Vox said, the lie coming smoothly. "No point in all of us being awkwardly positioned when we can just rearrange to suit everyone's preferences better."

He made his way down the aisle, navigating past other passengers and their scattered belongings. Barbara's seat was exactly where Margaret had indicated, positioned near a window with Alastor in the aisle seat across from her.

Vox reached the seat and looked at Alastor with what he hoped was casual friendliness rather than the triumph currently flooding his system. "So did anyone actually ask you if you were okay with this arrangement? Or did Margaret and Barbara just decide among themselves and assume you'd be fine with whatever they worked out?"

Alastor's eyes had been closed, his head resting against the seat back in a posture that suggested either sleep or deliberate avoidance of social interaction. They opened now, tracking to Vox's face with an expression that was difficult to parse. Something between resignation and faint amusement, like he'd been expecting this exact scenario to unfold and had simply been waiting for it to arrive.

"I was not consulted, no." His voice was carefully neutral, carrying none of the warmth of his usual public persona. "Barbara informed me approximately thirty seconds ago that you would be taking her seat. I assume my opinion on this arrangement is irrelevant given that you're already standing here with your belongings."

"I can go back if you'd prefer," Vox offered, the suggestion completely insincere. "Don't want to impose on your personal space or anything like that."

"Please, sit." Alastor gestured toward the now vacant seat with theatrical courtesy.

Vox settled into the seat, arranging his coat and newspaper with an expression that was perhaps too satisfied given the circumstances. The positioning put him directly across from Alastor, their knees almost touching in the limited space between seats, close enough that Vox could see individual details in Alastor's expression that distance usually obscured.

Down the aisle, he could hear Margaret's voice rising with enthusiasm as she launched into whatever conversation had been interrupted by the seating swap. Barbara's responses were quieter, harder to make out.

"They seem to be getting along well," Vox observed, his attention still partially directed toward the distant conversation. "Margaret was worried about bothering you with all her back and forth trips. Thought you might appreciate having your space back."

"How considerate." Alastor's tone suggested he found nothing particularly considerate about the situation.

Vox unfolded his newspaper, the one he'd purchased yesterday with the missing person article, spreading it across the tiny table between them more for something to do with his hands than actual reading interest. The motion drew Alastor's attention briefly, his eyes tracking the movement before returning to whatever he'd been observing outside the window before Vox's arrival.

"So," Vox began, his tone shifting into something more conversational. "How are you feeling about the symposium? Excited? Nervous? Some combination of both?"

Alastor made a noncommittal sound that could have meant anything, his eyes still fixed on nothing in particular.

"I was reading the preliminary schedule they sent out," Vox continued, undeterred by the minimal response. "Looks like there's some interesting technical demonstrations lined up. That new signal processing equipment from RCA should be worth seeing, and apparently there's going to be a panel discussion about future broadcast standards that could get heated given the competing interests involved."

Another minimal sound, this one possibly containing a hint of acknowledgment but offering nothing substantial to build conversation around.

Vox felt his enthusiasm deflate slightly but pressed forward anyway, determined to get some kind of actual engagement. "And the evening reception tonight should be good networking opportunity. Chance to meet people from other stations, make connections that could be useful down the line. I'm hoping to talk to some of the equipment manufacturers, see what they've got in development that might not be publicly available yet."

"Hmm."

The response was so minimal it barely qualified as participation in the conversation. Vox studied Alastor more carefully, trying to determine if this was deliberate dismissiveness or something else entirely.

Alastor's posture was wrong, he realized with suddenly. It was too stiff, lacking the usual theatrical elements that characterized even his casual interactions. His hands were folded in his lap, his shoulders held too rigidly to be mistaken for relaxation or indifference. Vox had needled him far more than this before, but he had never seen Alastor like this.

"Are you alright?" Vox asked, his tone shifting from conversational to confused. "You seem different than usual."

"I'm fine." The response came too quickly, "And yourself?"

"You don't look fine." Vox leaned forward slightly, studying Alastor's face with increased attention. "You look like you're concentrating very hard on something. What is it?"

"I'm simply tired from the early departure." Alastor's smile remained fixed but his eyes looked almost glassy, like he was experiencing genuine physical discomfort rather than just social irritation. "Perhaps I should have gotten more sleep last night instead of staying up to handle last minute preparations."

Vox didn't believe that explanation for a second but couldn't immediately identify what was actually wrong. He ran through possibilities mentally, cataloging symptoms and potential causes.

"Do you feel motion sick?" The question emerged before Vox had fully processed the conclusion, landing with unexpected directness.

Alastor's expression shifted, something flickering across his features too quickly to identify but carrying the look of someone who'd just been caught in a lie, the careful control slipping just enough to reveal genuine surprise.

"I'm not..." He started, then stopped, apparently recognizing that denial would be pointless given Vox's sudden accuracy. "No."

"You are!" Vox felt delight bloom in his chest, the discovery of this unexpected vulnerability somehow exciting rather than worrying. "You're trying really hard not to throw up on this train!"

"I am not trying hard not to throw up." The indignation in Alastor's voice was unmistakable. "I'm simply experiencing mild discomfort from the train's movement, which is completely normal and not worth discussing or drawing attention to in this manner."

"Don't worry, I've got you." Vox was already starting to stand, his mind racing ahead to solutions. "I'll go find someone who can give you medicine for it. The train staff probably have something. This is totally manageable, you just need the right medication and you'll be fine for the rest of the trip."

"I said no, Vincent." Alastor's tone had developed an edge. "The answer is no. I don't want medication, I don't want you bothering the train staff on my behalf, I don't want this to become some kind of situation that draws attention or requires intervention from anyone."

The firmness in his voice left no room for argument. Vox recognized the tone from hell, yet now it carried a strange, almost pitiable weight instead of menace.

"Okay." Vox held up his hands in surrender, backing off from the suggestion. "No medication. Got it. But if you change your mind, just let me know and I'll go get something. The offer stands for the entire trip."

Alastor nodded once, the gesture curt, then returned his attention to the scenery outside with renewed focus. The conversation had clearly ended from his perspective, his body language communicating that he wanted to be left alone to manage his discomfort in peace.

Vox looked down at his newspaper again, unfolding it with deliberate casualness. "Do you want to read this with me? I got it yesterday, has some interesting articles. Might help distract from feeling sick, give your mind something else to focus."

He held up the paper so Alastor could see the front page, the missing person article visible in the lower section. Alastor's eyes moved to it with apparent interest, his expression shifting into something more engaged.

"That's the disappearance everyone's been talking about," Alastor observed, his voice carrying professional curiosity rather than personal investment. "The man who vanished from the financial district. Has there been any development in the case?"

"No body, no leads, no evidence of foul play." Vox scanned the article again despite having already memorized its contents. "Police are continuing their investigation but seem to be at a complete loss. Family is offering a reward for information but nobody's come forward with anything useful."

"How unfortunate." Alastor's tone remained carefully neutral, the kind of generic sympathy people felt when discussing tragedies that didn't personally affect them. "One hopes he simply decided to start fresh somewhere else rather than meeting with some darker fate."

The phrasing was perfect, exactly what an innocent person would say when presented with this kind of story. Appropriate concern without excessive interest, acknowledgment of the tragedy without dwelling on morbid details. Vox found himself actually believing for a moment that Alastor had nothing to do with this disappearance, that the timing was pure coincidence and his paranoid suspicions were completely unfounded.

"You think he just left voluntarily?" Vox kept his voice casual, conversational, not revealing the intensity with which he was monitoring Alastor's responses. "Walked away from his entire life without telling anyone where he was going? He was a rich and successful businessman if I remember correctly."

"People do that more often than you'd think." Alastor's expression remained thoughtful, his eyes still on the article. "The pressure of maintaining appearances, of living up to

expectations, of fulfilling obligations that feel increasingly suffocating. Sometimes the only solution feels like complete escape, starting over somewhere nobody knows who you're supposed to be."

The observation was delivered with enough genuine understanding that Vox felt something uncomfortable twist in his chest.

"Though of course," Alastor continued, his tone shifting slightly, "the alternative is considerably darker. Someone with the right skills and motivation could make a person disappear quite thoroughly, leaving no trace for investigators to follow."

Vox's attention sharpened immediately, his earlier relief evaporating. Was that a confession disguised as speculation? Or just Alastor demonstrating the kind of macabre interest many people had in such cases?

"You've thought about this a lot," Vox said carefully, watching Alastor's face for any telltale reaction.

"I had to cover it, after all." Alastor's smile had returned, the theatrical tone that made him such an effective radio personality had reemerged. "It's like solving a complex puzzle, except the stakes are considerably higher than typical puzzles involve."

"Right. So it's all intellectual interest." Vox couldn't quite keep the skepticism out of his voice.

"Indeed." Alastor's attention had drifted again, his body language suggesting the conversation about the missing person was concluded from his perspective. "Though I suspect we'll never know what actually happened to the poor fellow. Most missing persons cases that go cold in the first week stay cold permanently. The trail goes stale, witnesses forget details, evidence degrades. Eventually the investigation becomes just another open file gathering dust in some detective's cabinet."

The observation was delivered with the same neutral tone as his earlier comments, offering no particular insight into whether Alastor had personal knowledge of how missing persons

investigations typically unfolded.

Vox decided to drop it, recognizing that pushing further would either reveal nothing useful or potentially expose his own suspicions in ways that could complicate their working relationship. "I need to use the bathroom. You want anything while I'm up?"

"I'm perfectly fine, thank you." Alastor's dismissal was polite but firm, his eyes closing again as he settled back into his careful stillness.

Vox stood and moved into the aisle, making his way toward the rear of the train where the facilities were located. But his mind wasn't on the bathroom at all, already calculating how to acquire medication without directly disobeying Alastor's explicit instructions not to bother anyone on his behalf. If he did exactly as he was told, then Alastor would have no reason to turn down his help.

The train car had maybe forty other passengers scattered throughout, some reading newspapers or books, others engaged in quiet conversation, a few already dozing despite the early hour. Vox scanned them as he walked, looking for anyone who might be carrying medication or who looked like the helpful type.

An elderly woman near the middle of the car caught his attention, her purse open on the seat beside her revealing what looked like a small pharmacy. Exactly the kind of person who came prepared for every possible medical contingency.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" Vox approached with his most charming smile, the one that usually got people to cooperate without question. "I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but my traveling companion is experiencing some motion sickness and I was wondering if you might have anything that could help? I'd be happy to pay you for it, of course."

The woman looked up from her knitting, her expression cycling through suspicion to sympathy as she processed his request. "Oh the poor dear. Motion sickness is just terrible, especially on these longer trips. Let me see what I have."

She rummaged through her purse, producing a small bottle of pills that she examined briefly before handing to Vox. "Take one now and another in four hours if needed. Should settle the stomach right up. And no need to pay me, dear, I always bring extra medication for exactly these kinds of situations."

"Thank you so much." Vox accepted the bottle. "My friend will really appreciate this."

He continued toward the bathroom to maintain the fiction of his original purpose, spending a few minutes washing his hands and examining his reflection in the small mirror. His face looked tired, the dark circles under his eyes prominent despite his best efforts this morning.

He'd gotten the medication. Had successfully solved a problem despite explicit instructions not to, which felt like a small victory even if Alastor would probably be annoyed by the loophole.

Vox made his way back to their seats, the pill bottle tucked in his palm. Alastor remained in the same position, eyes closed. Vox settled back into his seat quietly, not wanting to disturb whatever fragile equilibrium Alastor had achieved.

"I got you some medicine," Vox said after a pause, holding the bottle where Alastor could see it without opening his eyes. He shook it so the contents rattled annoyingly. "Scammed a sweet old lady for it, so you better take them."

Alastor's eyes opened, fixing on the pill bottle with an expression of profound irritation. "I specifically told you not to do that."

"You told me not to bother the train staff. She was a passenger. Completely different thing." Vox kept his tone light, almost teasing. "And you're getting worse, I can tell. Just take the medicine. It's not worth suffering through the entire trip."

"I'm not suffering." Alastor's voice carried less conviction than his words suggested, his grip on the armrests confirming Vox's observation about his deteriorating condition.

"Right. You're just carefully managing mild discomfort." Vox opened the bottle, shaking out a single pill and holding it out. "Here. Take it and I promise I won't make fun of you for being sick anymore."

Alastor stared at the pill with the expression of someone being offered something deeply suspect. His pride was clearly warring with his discomfort, the internal battle playing out across his features with unusual transparency.

"Did you even verify what this medication is?" Alastor's tone had shifted into something more defensive, grasping for objections. "How do you know that woman wasn't just giving you random pills from her purse? For all you know this could be her heart medication or blood pressure medication or something completely unrelated to motion sickness."

"The bottle says what it is right on the label." Vox turned it so Alastor could read the faded print. "Standard motion sickness medication, completely safe, exactly what you need. Now stop being difficult and just take it before you actually do throw up and embarrass both of us."

The mention of potential public embarrassment seemed to tip the scales. Alastor reached out with obvious reluctance, his fingers closing around the pill slowly, like he was making a profound concession rather than accepting basic medical assistance.

"I'm going to need water," he said, the words carrying resignation mixed with continued irritation at having been overruled.

Vox flagged down a passing train attendant, requesting a cup of water. The attendant returned within a minute, handing over a small paper cup that sloshed slightly with the train's movement.

Alastor took the water, popped the pill into his mouth, and swallowed with an expression that suggested he was being forced to consume poison rather than helpful medication. "Satisfied?"

"Very." Vox settled back into his seat with poorly concealed satisfaction. "See? That wasn't so difficult. And in about thirty minutes you'll feel significantly better and can stop white

knuckling the armrests like you're on the Apollo mission."

Alastor’s head tilted, his eyes narrowing with dull, confused sharpness. "The what now?"

Vox froze. A sudden, icy prickle of sweat broke out at the back of his neck.

"Engineering jargon." he said, the words coming out a little too fast. He adjusted his glasses, refusing to look Alastor in the eye. "Just some hypothetical aerospace testing I read about in the journals. Forget it."

Alastor studied him for a silent beat, his gaze lingering before he let out a faint, noncommittal hum. He closed his eyes again, his head leaning back against the plush seat.

They fell into silence after that, Vox returning his attention to the newspaper. The train rattled along its tracks, the motion that had been causing Alastor such distress apparently unremarkable to everyone else in the car.

"Is this your first time traveling by train?" Vox asked after several minutes of quiet, genuine curiosity overriding his awareness that Alastor probably wanted to be left alone. "Or have you done this before?"

"No." Alastor's eyes remained closed but his voice carried slightly less strain than earlier, suggesting the medication might already be taking effect. "I'm not from around here, so that's at least one time I had to take the train to arrive in the city. Required several transfers and considerably more hours than this Hartford trip will take."

"And other times?" Vox pressed, his interest genuinely piqued by this rare glimpse into Alastor's history. "Were there other times you traveled by train? You're being very vague about your background."

"I prefer to maintain some mystery." Alastor's mouth curved into something that was closer to his usual smile. "Keeps people interested."

"So you want to keep me interested?" Vox recognized a deflection when he heard one, had deployed similar tactics countless times himself when people asked questions he didn't want to answer. "You're not going to tell me?"

"Correct." Alastor's tone suggested this conversation topic had reached its conclusion.

Vox sighed, returning his attention to the newspaper. They sat in companionable silence for a while, the only sounds the train's movement and the distant murmur of other passengers' conversations.

Chapter 53

The newspaper rustled softly as it slipped from Vincent's loosening grip, his breathing evening out, his head tilted at an angle that would probably leave his neck sore when he woke. Alastor cracked one eye open, just enough to confirm what his ears had already told him, that Vincent had finally succumbed to whatever exhaustion had been building behind his manic energy all morning.

The silence was pleasant, the absence of Vincent's constant commentary almost physical in its weight. Alastor studied him a moment longer than courtesy or prudence would allow if the man was awake. The dark circles under his eyes were growing more and more prominent every time they met, his features sharper from poor nutrition or restless nights, his clothes rumpled and clearly not ironed.

Alastor shifted his attention to his own hand, still clenched in his lap where Vincent couldn't see it, his fingers wrapped around the small white pill. The deception had been easy enough, just a simple slight of hand trick. Vincent had been so focused on winning the argument about whether Alastor would take the medicine that he hadn't bothered to verify the pill had actually been consumed.

The nausea was still present, rolling through his stomach in waves that required active concentration to suppress, his grip on the armrests had loosened only slightly since the trip began but the tension remained visible to anyone who bothered to look closely. The motion of the train felt wrong in ways that were difficult to articulate, the constant swaying and lurching creating a sensory experience that his body rejected with increasing intensity.

He needed to do something other than sit here feeling progressively worse. He needed the privacy of the bathroom where he could stop performing for a few minutes and just deal with the physical reality of his situation.

Alastor stood slowly, testing his balance against the train's movement, his hand finding the seat back for support as the floor seemed to shift beneath him. The other passengers remained absorbed in their own activities, nobody paying particular attention to him as he made his way down the aisle.

The bathroom was mercifully unoccupied when he reached it, the small space exactly as cramped and utilitarian as he'd expected from train facilities, but it offered the one thing he desperately needed right now which was a locked door between himself and the rest of humanity.

The mirror reflected someone who looked considerably worse than Alastor preferred to appear in public. He turned away from his own reflection, unwilling to confront the visual evidence of his deteriorating condition, his attention shifting instead to the small white pill still clutched in his palm.

The thing sat there looking innocuous and vaguely accusatory, a reminder that Vincent had been right about him needing medication and that Alastor's pride had prevented him from accepting help that might actually improve his situation. The logic was straightforward enough that even his current compromised state could follow it. If he took the pill he would probably feel better within thirty minutes to an hour, the nausea would recede to manageable levels, he could stop expending so much energy on maintaining his composure.

But taking the pill now would mean Vincent had been right, would mean admitting that his judgment about what Alastor needed was more accurate than Alastor's own assessment of his condition, would mean Vincent had successfully identified a vulnerability. The humiliation of accepting help warred with the humiliation of continued sickness, each option carrying its own particular flavor of defeat that made the choice more complicated than it had any right to be.

Alastor stared at the pill for longer than the decision probably warranted, his mind working through increasingly circular arguments about pride and pragmatism and whether anyone would actually know if he took it now in private rather than having taken it earlier under Vincent's watch. The nausea rolled through him again with renewed intensity, sharp enough to make him grip the tiny sink for support, his body making its opinion on the matter perfectly clear.

He lifted the pill to his mouth before he could talk himself out of it again, swallowing it dry. The act felt simultaneously practical and deeply annoying, a concession to limitations he preferred not to acknowledge.

Alastor unlocked the door and made his way back to their seats, his body still protesting the train's motion but his mind slightly more settled now that the decision had been made and executed. Vincent remained exactly as Alastor had left him, slumped in his seat with his head tilted back, the newspaper now half resting precariously on his lap.

The newspaper caught Alastor's attention as he settled back into his own seat, the missing person article still visible from Vincent's earlier insistence on sharing it, the headline and opening paragraphs positioned where they could be read without picking up the paper. Alastor reached over slowly, his movements careful not to disturb Vincent's sleep, his fingers closing around the newspaper's edge.

The article itself was standard fare for this kind of story, the basic facts presented with appropriate gravity. Alastor found himself oddly amused by the memory of Vincent reading the same exact story during his broadcast, the way he'd delivered the information with perfect professional neutrality that would make audiences trust his presentation of events even when those events were uncertain.

Vincent had been remarkable during that broadcast actually. Alastor could admit that as long as Vincent didn't hear the acknowledgment and potentially misinterpret it as encouragement. Alastor had been visiting the Pendergasts that evening, had arrived for dinner only to find Eleanor and her husband absorbed in watching the television news, the device positioned prominently in their living room commanding attention in ways that radio couldn't quite match despite superior audio quality. The screen had shown Vincent's face in that particular close framing that television favored, every expression visible and magnified, his delivery smooth and confident in ways that suggested this was his natural environment rather than something he'd learned through training.

Television was a wasteful medium of course, all that visual information competing with the audio content rather than supporting it, the requirement for performers to maintain not just vocal quality but also visual presentation creating additional demands that ultimately degraded the purity of the message being conveyed. Radio was superior in every meaningful way, the focus on voice and sound design allowing for more sophisticated storytelling, the theater of the mind engaging audiences more deeply than passive visual consumption ever could.

But Alastor had to acknowledge, however reluctantly, that Vincent seemed genuinely suited for television in ways that would have been wasted on radio, his particular combination of technical knowledge and visual presentation creating something that worked within that medium's limitations even if those limitations remained fundamentally inferior to what radio

could achieve. It was almost fortunate, actually, that Vincent had committed himself to television rather than attempting to compete in radio, not that he would have posed any real threat to Alastor's position given the considerable gap in their respective talents, but it would have been tedious either way.

Alastor glanced sideways at the sleeping man, his earlier amusement fading into something more complicated and harder to name. Vincent looked somehow different in sleep, made him appear almost harmless despite everything Alastor knew about his potential capabilities and intentions. The contrast between Vincent's waking performance and his unconscious state was striking enough to make Alastor wonder which version was more authentic, or if perhaps both were equally false presentations designed to obscure whatever actually existed beneath the constantly shifting masks.

The pill bottle sat on the small table between them, the faded label still partially visible. Standard over the counter motion sickness medication exactly as Vincent had claimed. Alastor picked it up, turning it in his fingers, reading the dosage information and warnings.

The medication was legitimate, the old woman Vincent had somehow convinced to part with it apparently maintaining higher standards for her traveling pharmacy than Alastor had given her credit for.

Alastor set the bottle back down, his attention drifting to the window where the landscape continued its monotonous scroll past the glass, bare trees and frozen fields stretching toward the sky that all looked essentially identical, the kind of scenery that people claimed to find beautiful or contemplative but which Alastor had always found merely tedious. Travel was supposed to broaden perspectives, expose people to new environments and experiences, but train travel just meant watching the same basic landscape repeat itself for hours while trapped in uncomfortable seats with strangers who had no consideration for others' need for quiet.

The drowsiness hit him without warning, a heavy feeling spreading through his limbs, his thoughts slowing and becoming harder to grasp, his eyelids suddenly weighing ten pounds each. Alastor blinked hard, trying to force alertness back into his system, but the sensation persisted and intensified.

This had to be the medication, some side effect the label probably mentioned that Alastor hadn't bothered to read thoroughly because he'd been too focused on verifying it was actually motion sickness treatment rather than something potentially harmful.

His thoughts wandered. One moment he was watching the passing blur outside the window, the next there was nothing at all. No clear break, just a quiet lapse he didn’t register.

He jerked upright with a start that made the passenger across the aisle glance over with mild concern. Alastor forced his eyes open wider, tried to focus on the window, on anything that might keep him awake.

The realization hit him with uncomfortable force despite his compromised mental state. He had fallen asleep, actually fallen asleep while trying to stay awake, had lost entire minutes to unconsciousness without even noticing the transition. The knowledge was deeply unsettling in ways that went beyond simple embarrassment. His entire existence depended on maintaining awareness and control of his surroundings, on being the one who watched rather than the one who was watched, on never being vulnerable enough that someone could observe him without his knowledge.

His thoughts felt wrong, sluggish and irrational and petulant in ways that reminded him uncomfortably of childhood, the tiredness making everything feel uncertain and potentially threatening.

Vincent was still asleep, his breathing unchanged, his position suggesting deep sleep rather than the light dozing that might allow him to snap back to awareness if something were to happen. They were both asleep simultaneously in a moving vehicle surrounded by strangers. The thought bothered him more than it should have given the extremely low probability of actual danger on a commercial passenger train in broad daylight.

He needed someone else conscious and alert even if that someone was the source of his current predicament. His foot moved before conscious decision fully formed, his leg extending under the small table separating their seats, his foot connecting with Vincent's shin with enough force to jolt him awake without being obvious to other passengers.

Vincent's eyes snapped open immediately, his body tensing, his expression cycling through confusion and disorientation as he tried to figure out what had pulled him from sleep. His gaze found Alastor's face after a moment, question clear in his features even though he hadn't yet formed words.

Alastor raised his eyebrows, his expression mildly curious despite the satisfaction of having successfully transferred his own discomfort onto someone else. "What? Did the train hitch wake you?"

Vincent frowned, his hand moving down to touch his leg where Alastor's kick had landed, his body bending forward as he rubbed the spot, his chin almost coming to rest on the table between them as he looked up at Alastor with suspicion that was probably justified given what had actually occurred. "Did you kick me?"

The accusation was delivered with enough certainty that Alastor knew denial wouldn't be fully believed, but the game required him to protest anyway, to maintain the fiction that Vincent's conclusion was unreasonable. His expression shifted into something resembling offense, his tone carrying wounded dignity. "The train lurched. You probably hit your leg on something."

Vincent stared at him for another moment, clearly unconvinced but apparently deciding the issue wasn't worth pursuing further, his attention shifting from Alastor's face to the window where the landscape continued its monotonous progression. He leaned forward on his elbows, his posture suggesting he had no intention of sitting up properly anytime soon, his gaze fixed on the scenery with the kind of unfocused attention that meant he was thinking about something other than what he was actually looking at.

"My father used to take us on the train every summer," Vincent said after a moment, his voice carrying that particular nostalgic quality people adopted when discussing childhood memories they'd decided were meaningful. "Up to his sister's place. Same route every year, same scenery. I remember thinking it was the most boring thing in the world, watching the same trees and fields go past for hours."

Alastor made a soft sound of acknowledgment, his eyes drifting closed despite his best efforts to keep them open. The heaviness was pulling him down, his body deciding that sleep was more important than listening to Vincent's childhood train experiences.

"Everything looks the same after a while," Vincent continued, apparently unbothered by Alastor's lack of visible engagement. "The trees, the houses, the little towns we'd pass through. You'd think there'd be more variety, but it's just the same basic landscape repeating itself endlessly. I used to count telephone poles just to have something to do."

The words reached Alastor as if from a great distance, filtering through layers of drowsiness that made comprehension difficult. He was aware that Vincent was still talking, that some response was probably expected, but forming actual words felt like an insurmountable task.

"...but she always disagreed. What do you think?" Vincent's voice sharpened slightly, carrying a question that Alastor had completely missed.

"Mm."

There was a pause, longer than comfortable. Then Vincent's tone shifted into something more pointed. "That doesn't answer the question."

Alastor's eyes opened, blinking with the sluggish confusion of someone pulled from the edge of sleep. Vincent was leaning forward on his elbows, his face closer than Alastor had realized, frowning at him with an expression that suggested genuine bewilderment rather than offense.

"Sorry," Alastor managed, his voice coming out rougher than intended. "Could you repeat that?"

Vincent's frown deepened, his eyes narrowing as understanding dawned. "Wait. Were you falling asleep just now? I thought you were ignoring me."

Alastor's mouth tightened, pride flaring even through the medication induced fog. "I *was* ignoring you."

The admission came out before he could think better of it.

Vincent laughed, the sound carrying genuine amusement rather than mockery. "I can tell from your voice you were falling asleep. You'd rather insult me than just admit you're sleepy?

What's your problem?"

"How is that insulting you?" Alastor heard himself asking, his brain struggling to follow Vincent's logic through the heavy blanket of drowsiness.

"You just said you were purposefully ignoring me." Vincent's tone remained light, playful rather than actually offended, his eyes bright with the kind of teasing energy that suggested he'd found something entertaining to focus on. "That's pretty rude, don't you think?"

"So?" Alastor leaned back in his seat. "No hard feelings."

Vincent's expression shifted into something between incredulity and amusement. "What do you mean, 'no hard feelings'? You can't just tell someone you're ignoring them and then act like that's a perfectly reasonable thing to do."

"Why do you decide to take it so personally?" The words came out with the kind of blunt honesty that Alastor would normally filter, his exhaustion stripping away the layers of social performance. "Perhaps I simply didn't want to listen to you in that particular moment. That's allowed."

"What if I was saying something important?" Despite the hint of defensiveness in Vincent's voice, his posture still looked relaxed.

Alastor's eyes were closing again, he could feel them drifting shut despite his best efforts to maintain the conversation. "Were you saying something important?"

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?" The question came out slightly slurred, his body deciding that sleep was happening regardless of Vincent's continued efforts at engagement.

"The point is..." Vincent paused, apparently noticing Alastor's deteriorating state. "Are you even listening to me right now?"

"No."

"That's not the right answer."

"It's the answer you're getting." Alastor shifted in his seat, trying to find a position that would be comfortable enough for actual sleep rather than this half conscious state. "You're welcome to continue talking if you find it entertaining, but I'm not responding further."

Vincent was quiet for a moment, his expression shifting through several emotions too quickly to track. Then he leaned forward again, his voice dropping slightly. "What if someone comes over? What if they want an autograph?"

Alastor managed to crack one eye open, his mouth curving into something that was almost a smile despite his exhaustion. "Forge it."

"I don't even know what your signature looks like."

"Neither do they." Alastor let his eye close again, surrendering to the inevitable. “Don’t wake me unless the train gets derailed.”

He could hear Vincent huffing, but whatever response he might have been preparing never came. The train's rhythmic motion had transformed from nauseating to almost soothing, the medication doing its work despite the inconvenient side effects, and Alastor found himself drifting down into actual sleep this time rather than fighting against it.

The last thing he was aware of was Vincent's continued presence across from him, still watching, still paying attention even when there was nothing particularly interesting to observe.

Then even that awareness faded, and there was only sleep.

Chapter 54

Vox sat there after Alastor finally passed out, his leg throbbing where it had been kicked.

The sharp pain was settling into a dull ache now. He *knew* Alastor had kicked him. The excuse he had given Vox was transparent bullshit, delivered with a straight face that would have been impressive if Vox hadn't felt the deliberate impact of a foot connecting with his shin with surprising force.

What made it worse was that Vox couldn't figure out why. He'd been literally unconscious, drooling probably, completely dead to the world. For once he hadn't been annoying Alastor, hadn't been talking or staring or doing anything that could possibly warrant retaliation.

And yet Alastor had woken him up anyway, apparently just because he felt like it.

This guy was an animal. No wonder he'd turned into one in Hell. It wasn't divine punishment matching the crime or poetic justice or anything like that. It was because Alastor didn't know how to behave in a civilized society and simply operated on pure instinct and impulse without considering whether his actions made any logical sense.

Kick sleeping people. Why? Because they're there. No further justification required.

Vox rubbed his shin one more time, his fingers finding the tender spot and pressing just hard enough to confirm it would definitely bruise. Great. Something to look forward to. A lovely purple reminder of Alastor's charming personality, visible every time he changed clothes for the next week.

The train swayed slightly as it rounded a curve, the motion gentle but persistent. Someone several rows ahead coughed, the sound wet and phlegmy. A baby started fussing in one of the rear cars, its shrill wail barely audible through the closed doors but present enough to be irritating.

Vox stood slowly, his muscles protesting the movement after sitting cramped for too long, his back cracking audibly as he stretched.

The air in the train car felt warm and slightly stale despite the ventilation. It smelled like a combination of someone's overpowering perfume from several rows back and the faint must of old upholstery that had absorbed decades of passenger odors. Not unpleasant exactly, just distinctly trainlike.

The newspaper had moved from Vox's hands, now resting on the small table between their seats, the paper refolded with more precision than Vox ever bothered with. Someone had definitely gone through it, had opened it up and read enough to leave physical evidence.

Alastor must have been reading it while Vox slept. Made sense. He was probably bored out of his mind, looking for anything to occupy him as long as it didn't involve actually talking to Vox or acknowledging his presence.

Vox glanced back at Alastor, who'd shifted slightly in sleep. His head was tilted toward the window now, one hand tucked under his chin.

He turned away from Alastor's sleeping form and headed down the aisle toward where Margaret and Barbara sat. Barbara was facing his direction, her posture perfect even in the narrow train seat. She noticed him approaching first. She said something to Margaret, her voice too quiet to hear over the ambient noise of the constant low rumble of the engine. Margaret turned in her seat, her face lighting up with genuine happiness when she spotted him.

Vox leaned against the back of her seat, his posture casual despite the various discomforts accumulating in his body. "How are you two doing? Everything okay?"

"Wonderful!" Margaret's enthusiasm was infectious, her earlier concerns about the trip apparently forgotten or at least suppressed. "Barbara's been telling me about some of the symposium events. It sounds absolutely fascinating. There's going to be a reception tonight with all the major equipment manufacturers presenting their latest innovations."

"And several panel discussions throughout the weekend," Barbara added, her tone professional even in casual conversation. She had a small notebook open on her lap, its pages covered in neat handwriting that outlined schedules and coordination details. "Technical demonstrations, networking sessions, the usual conference programming. Should be quite educational if you're interested in broadcast technology."

Vox nodded along, his brain cataloging this information. "How soon until we're in Hartford? I lost track of time."

Barbara glanced at her watch. "About forty minutes. We should start gathering our things soon, actually. The station isn't very large and the platform can get crowded during symposium week."

Forty minutes. Vox felt his stomach tighten at the information, anxiety he'd been suppressing suddenly surging back to full strength. Forty minutes until they arrived and he had to face the hotel situation, had to either admit he had no reservation or somehow bluff his way into a room that almost certainly didn't exist.

"And the hotel?" Vox kept his voice carefully casual, the question delivered like simple coordination rather than desperate information gathering. "What was the name of the hotel again?"

"The Hartford Arms," Margaret said brightly, her smile widening like she was sharing particularly good news. "It's apparently one of the nicer establishments in the city. The radio station booked several rooms there for their staff, and my reservation got added to the same block. Very convenient."

She pulled a small envelope from her purse as she spoke, extracting what looked like official travel documents. Vox caught a glimpse of letterhead, typed confirmation numbers, proper documentation that people with legitimate reservations carried. At least he thought so, since he didn't have anything of the sort with him.

Barbara nodded in agreement, her attention returning to her notebook. "Alastor, myself, and the technical staff who came up yesterday are all there. Makes it much easier to handle any

last minute preparations without people scattered across multiple locations."

The information hit Vox like cold water, his internal panic spiking while his external expression remained pleasantly interested.

They were all staying at the same hotel. The same hotel he'd claimed to have booked a room at when Alastor had asked during their phone call. The same hotel where every room was probably already occupied by symposium attendees who'd made their reservations weeks in advance like sensible people instead of pretending they had arrangements sorted when they absolutely didn't.

"That's great," Vox heard himself saying, the words coming out smooth despite everything. "Really convenient for networking opportunities. Being able to coordinate informally between sessions, that kind of thing."

Sweat was forming along his hairline despite the train's comfortable temperature. He was going to show up at the Hartford Arms and discover they had no vacancy. Was going to have to find accommodation elsewhere while everyone else stayed together.

Margaret was saying something about the symposium schedule, her hands gesturing animatedly as she described various sessions she wanted to attend. Vox nodded while his mind raced through increasingly desperate contingency plans.

He could arrive late to check in, claim his reservation had been lost, make a scene about incompetent hotel management until they found him a room somewhere. Or he could just immediately leave to "check on something" and find different lodging before anyone noticed he wasn't actually staying at the Hartford Arms. Or maybe there would miraculously be a last minute cancellation and this would all work out fine through sheer dumb luck.

Barbara's attention had drifted past him, her expression becoming more focused. She moved slightly in her seat, craning her neck to see better around Vox's body blocking her view.

Vox frowned, turning to follow her gaze down the aisle.

A man was sitting in his seat, his body angled toward Alastor with the overeager posture of someone who'd recognized a celebrity and decided this was an appropriate time for conversation. He was maybe forty, wearing a brown suit that had seen better days, his thinning hair slicked back.

Alastor was awake now, sitting upright with his hands folded in his lap, his expression composed and pleasant. That public performance smile was firmly in place, the one Vox had learned to recognize as meaning absolutely nothing about Alastor's actual emotional state, nodding along to whatever the stranger was saying.

"Wait, I'll be right back," Vox said abruptly, cutting off whatever Margaret had been explaining mid sentence.

He moved down the aisle faster than was probably appropriate for a moving train. The stranger was gesturing enthusiastically now, his voice carrying enough that Vox could catch fragments about "your radio program" and "absolutely brilliant" as he approached.

Alastor's eyes tracked Vox's approach, something flickering in his expression too quickly to identify before the pleasant mask reasserted itself completely. Was that relief? Irritation? Impossible to tell.

Vox reached the seats and planted his hand on the man's shoulder, his grip firm enough to wrinkle the fabric of the suit jacket. His voice came out bright and aggressively friendly, seemingly thrilled to join an ongoing conversation. "Hello! Sorry to interrupt!"

The man looked up at Vox, eyes wide and full of confusion.

"Alastor, is this your friend?" Vox directed the question at Alastor while maintaining his grip on the stranger's shoulder, his smile wide and completely artificial.

Alastor's own smile didn't waver, his voice carrying polite neutrality. "We just met, actually. He was kind enough to express his appreciation for the program."

"That's great!" Vox's enthusiasm dialed up another notch, his free hand gesturing broadly. "I'm Vincent Whittman, I work in television. Are you in broadcasting as well? You must be, since you're heading to Hartford for the symposium."

The stranger blinked, his attention reluctantly shifting from Alastor to this new source of aggressive friendliness. "Uh, yes, actually. Technical engineering for a station in Boston. I was just telling Mr. Alastor how much I admire his..."

"Engineering! That's great!" Vox's hand squeezed the man's shoulder tighter, his body angling in a way that created subtle pressure for the man to stand. "You know, I've been working on some really interesting projects myself lately. Are you going to attend the technical demonstration later? Are you presenting anything?"

The train swayed slightly as it took another curve, the motion providing natural momentum for Vox's subtle coaxing. The stranger's body responded to the combined pressure of Vox's hand and the train's movement, beginning to rise from the seat without fully conscious decision.

"Well, I've heard some discussions about..."

"I bet your project is absolutely remarkable when you really dig into the mathematics." Vox was talking faster now, his words flowing in an uninterrupted stream that didn't allow for response or interjection. His hand on the man's shoulder applied gentle but insistent pressure, coaxing him up from the seat while maintaining the appearance of enthusiastic conversation. "Small stuff like that could revolutionize how we think about broadcasting and I'd love to get your perspective on the challenges our field is facing because that's really where most designs fail to account for real world operating conditions."

The stranger looked like he didn't quite remember the transition from sitting to standing, his body responding to Vox's physical guidance while his brain tried to keep up with the technical barrage. He wobbled slightly as the train moved, one hand reaching out to steady himself against the seat back. "I suppose that makes sense, though I haven't personally worked on anything involving..."

"I'm sure the requirements are fascinating once you start considering the existing architecture," Vox continued seamlessly, his body now positioned between the stranger and the seat, creating a physical barrier. His hand had shifted from the man's shoulder to his elbow, a seemingly natural progression that allowed for easier steering. "Because you can't just scale down existing designs, you need to completely rethink the approach from first principles, which I'm sure you understand given your engineering background."

The stranger was nodding along now, his face showing that particular glazed expression people got when they were being subjected to monologues. His feet had shuffled backward a step, then another, his body unconsciously responding to Vox's gentle but persistent guidance away from the seats.

"You know what, I actually have a colleague you should meet," Vox said, his tone shifting into helpful networking mode. "He's doing some really innovative work in signal processing that I think would interest you. He's probably up in one of the forward cars, let me introduce you."

"Oh, that's not necessary, I should probably..." The stranger glanced back toward where Alastor sat, clearly wanting to return to his original conversation.

"No, no, I insist!" Vox's hand moved from the stranger's elbow with a final gentle pat, the gesture simultaneously friendly and dismissive. "He'll be thrilled to discuss these concepts with someone who actually understands the technical challenges. It's so rare to find competent engineers nowadays, am I right Alastor?"

The stranger allowed himself to be guided a few more steps down the aisle, his attention still split between Vox's ongoing monologue and the rapidly increasing distance from Alastor. The confusion on his face was almost comical, the visible struggle to figure out how this man had hijacked the entire conversation. By the time they'd moved ten feet from the original seats, Vox's tone had already begun shifting, his enthusiasm fading into something more perfunctory.

"Actually, you know what, I'm not sure exactly which car he's in," Vox said, his hand dropping completely as his expression shifted into apologetic uncertainty. "And I should

probably get back to my seat before we arrive. But you should definitely look into those things I mentioned. Really fascinating stuff. Industry changing, probably."

Before the stranger could respond or suggest returning to continue his original conversation with Alastor, Vox had already turned away, his body language communicating complete dismissal as his attention shifted entirely to sliding back into his reclaimed seat.

"So Barbara and Margaret said we're all staying at the Hartford Arms," Vox said to Alastor without preamble, his pitch much more appropriate for conversation now. He deliberately didn't look back, his focus entirely on Alastor as if the previous interaction had already been forgotten completely. "Same hotel, makes coordination easier. They mentioned there's a reception tonight? Some kind of opening mixer for symposium attendees?"

Alastor's expression had shifted, though his public performance smile remained firmly in place. "Yes, that's correct. The symposium organizers like to start with a social event before diving into the technical programming. Allows people to network in a less formal setting."

Behind them, the stranger cleared his throat softly. Neither Vox nor Alastor acknowledged it, their conversation continuing as if they were the only two people in the train car. Vox could hear the man's shoes scuffing against the carpet, could sense his hesitation about whether to interrupt or retreat.

After a moment of awkward hovering, the stranger moved away down the aisle, his footsteps receding. Vox tracked the sound until it faded into the ambient noise, satisfied the threat had been neutralized.

"That was rude," Alastor said once the stranger was definitely out of earshot, his voice carrying mild reproach.

Vox turned to look at him, genuine confusion replacing his performative friendliness. "What? I thought I was doing you a favor. Guy was clearly bothering you, sitting in my seat, preventing you from resting before we arrive."

The window beside them showed countryside still rolling past, though the scenery was changing now as they approached Hartford. More buildings, fewer open fields.

"Bothering me?" Alastor's eyebrows arched, his expression shifting into something more pointed, one hand lifting to adjust his collar. "He was expressing appreciation for my work. That's standard interaction for anyone with even modest public recognition. You think I need protection from enthusiastic listeners?"

"I didn't say you needed protection." Vox felt defensive irritation rising in his chest, heat creeping up his neck. "I just thought-"

"I get this type of attention constantly," Alastor interrupted, his tone carrying particular smugness that made Vox want to kick him back, return the favor from earlier. "At restaurants, at industry events, even just walking down the street. People recognize the voice, they want to express their admiration. So far it has been perfectly manageable without *your* intervention."

"Impressive." Vox leaned back in his seat. "Go on, gloat some more about your social standing. Really makes me want to keep doing you favors."

"I'm simply pointing out that your 'favor' was unnecessary and frankly intrusive." Alastor's smile had developed an edge. "If I required assistance managing my public interactions, I would ask for it directly rather than relying on unsolicited interference."

The air between them felt charged suddenly, that particular tension that came from two people who fundamentally irritated each other being forced into close proximity for extended periods. The train car's warmth had gone from comfortable to stifling, the recycled air feeling thick in Vox's lungs.

"Fine." Vox stood abruptly, his irritation winning out over the desire to continue this increasingly pointless argument. "I'm going back to Margaret and Barbara then. Clearly you have everything under control here."

"No." The word was delivered with calm authority that made Vox pause mid motion, his body halfway between sitting and standing. "Sit down."

Vox turned slowly, his expression cycling through confusion and annoyance in rapid succession. "Excuse me?"

"Sit." Alastor's tone hadn't changed, still carrying that same pleasant firmness. His hands remained folded in his lap, his posture completely relaxed as if this command was the most natural thing in the world. "If more people approach wanting to chat, handle it. Either engage them in conversation yourself or prevent them from sitting down in the first place. I need to sleep for the remainder of the journey and would prefer not to be disturbed."

The audacity was breathtaking. Vox stared at him, his mouth opening and then closing as his brain struggled to process what had just been said. The train swayed again, stronger this time, nearly making him lose his balance in his half standing position.

"I thought I didn't need to protect you? I thought you could handle your enthusiastic admirers all by yourself?"

"I don't need protection," Alastor clarified, his patience sounding slightly strained. His fingers had begun drumming against his knee, a small tell that he was losing patience with this conversation. "I need uninterrupted rest. There's a difference. You're welcome to manage that in whatever way seems appropriate. Just don't chase away people who are already engaged in conversation, as you did just now. That reflects poorly on both of us."

"So I'm supposed to be what, your guard dog?" Vox's voice had risen slightly, drawing a glance from a passenger across the aisle. He lowered it again, leaning closer. "Just sit here preventing people from bothering you while you sleep? I want to talk to my girlfriend, who I haven't spent time with since we got on this train."

"Then bring Barbara back," Alastor suggested with the kind of casual practicality that suggested he'd already thought through this entire scenario and found a solution that served his purposes perfectly. "She can sit in her original seat, you can sit in yours, Margaret gets her companion back. Everyone's happy."

"Barbara *also* wants to talk to Margaret," Vox shot back, his frustration mounting. "They're having a perfectly nice conversation. I'm not dragging Barbara away from that just because you decided you need personal security for your nap time."

Alastor's smile shifted into something stranger, a small quirk at the corners that didn't match the rest of his expression. He sat up straighter, his posture adjusting as if preparing to say something significant.

Vox felt his irritation spike higher, his hands clenching in anticipation of whatever cutting remark was about to emerge. His jaw was tight enough that his teeth hurt, his molars grinding together. "What?"

"Nothing." Alastor's tone had gone mild again, dismissive in a way that somehow felt worse than direct criticism. "Go ahead. Return to Margaret and Barbara. I need to stay awake anyway since we'll be arriving soon."

The words landed wrong somehow. Vox had been expecting another argument, another manipulation to keep him in the seat, but instead he was sent away without resistance or apparent concern about whether Vox stayed or left.

This wasn't part of the plan, whatever plan there was supposed to be.

The train's wheels screeched slightly as they hit a section of track that needed maintenance, the sound sharp enough to make Vox wince. Outside the window, a factory complex was sliding past, its smokestacks dark against the gray sky.

Vox found himself lowering back into his seat despite having just declared his intention to leave. "I mean, I could stay I guess. If you need someone to-"

"Go on now." Alastor flicked his wrist, fingers waving as if brushing away a persistent fly, the movement theatrical enough to be borderline insulting. "Don't make her wait. She's been very patient about sharing your attention during the journey."

The emphasis on those last words carried layers of meaning that made Vox's skin prickle uncomfortably, made him aware of how this must look from outside.

He stood again, this time with less conviction, his body moving down the aisle toward Margaret and Barbara while his brain tried to process what had just happened and why it felt like he'd somehow lost an argument he hadn't known they were having.

Margaret brightened when he returned, immediately making space for him to join their conversation. Barbara had been explaining something about the symposium's technical demonstration schedule, her notes spread across the small table between them.

"Everything alright?" Margaret asked, her hand patting his arm gently. "You look bothered."

"Fine." Vox forced his expression back to something more pleasant. "Just coordinating with Alastor about arrival logistics."

Margaret accepted the lie with a small nod, apparently satisfied with the explanation. Why wouldn't she be? She had no reason to suspect that coordinating logistics actually meant having an increasingly bizarre argument about social boundaries and guard dog duties.

The quality of light coming through the windows had changed, the late afternoon sun breaking through clouds in horizontal rays. The train began its final approach to Hartford, the rhythm of its movement changing as speed decreased. Buildings pressed closer to the tracks now, industrial structures giving way to commercial districts. Vox could see streets running parallel to the rails, cars moving along them at a pace that seemed impossibly fast compared to the train's steady crawl.

The conductor's voice crackled over the intercom, announcing their imminent arrival and reminding passengers to gather their belongings. The sound quality was poor, the speaker system old and prone to distortion that turned certain words into unintelligible buzzes. But the message was clear enough. Hartford in fifteen minutes, everyone off.

Vox stood, preparing to head back to the seat he occupied for most of the train ride to gather his things. The other passengers were already moving, creating a slow migration toward the

exits as the train pulled into the station. The aisle became crowded with bodies and luggage, everyone jostling politely as they retrieved coats and gathered belongings from overhead compartments. It wasn't long until Vox lost sight of Margaret and Barbara entirely.

Alastor appeared beside them as he stood, his suitcase in hand, his appearance somehow impeccable despite having spent the past hour sleeping. His hair was perfect, not a strand out of place. His collar was straight, his tie properly positioned. Even his coat looked freshly pressed, though Vox knew for a fact it had been folded in the overhead compartment. His eyes moved over Vox's hair down his face, pausing at his collar, moving lower to his shirt and tie.

"Fix your shirt," Alastor said without preamble, his tone flat.

Vox looked down at himself, his shirt appearing perfectly fine from his perspective. The fabric looked smooth, the buttons were all fastened, nothing was obviously wrong. "What's wrong with my shirt?"

"It's rumpled." Alastor's attention moved upward, his eyes narrowing. "And your hair is a mess. And your tie is crooked."

The criticism was delivered as obvious facts. The sky is blue, water is wet, Vincent Whittman looks like he dressed in a moving vehicle without access to a mirror.

"There's nothing wrong with my tie!" Vox felt defensive heat rise to his face, his hand moving to his collar automatically, fingers finding the knot that Margaret had carefully adjusted this morning before they'd left. "Margaret fixed it for me this morning. It's fine."

"She apparently knows nothing about ties," Alastor observed, his mouth pressing into a thin line, his eyes showing genuine disapproval. "Fix it."

"I don't know how to fix it better than it already is." Vox's hands moved to the knot anyway, trying to determine what about it could possibly warrant criticism. The tie looked normal to him, properly positioned and secured at his throat. The fabric was smooth, the length seemed

appropriate, the knot wasn't obviously loose or malformed. "It's a perfectly functional tie. What's your problem?"

Alastor's eyes narrowed further, his hand moving to his own neck in demonstration. His fingers worked his own tie, loosening it slightly and then retightening it to show... something. Vox had no idea what. The gestures conveyed absolutely nothing useful.

"Like this," Alastor said, as if this explained anything. "You look like you dressed in the dark."

Vox stared at Alastor's neck, watching his hands adjust his own tie with movements that were too fast to follow in detail. The demonstration lasted maybe five seconds and accomplished nothing except making Vox feel more confused. "I have no idea what you're doing. That doesn't help."

Around them, passengers were still flowing past, the crowd thick enough now that people were bumping against each other. Someone's elbow caught Vox's shoulder, a muttered apology following. The space was getting more cramped by the second as everyone prepared to exit simultaneously.

"Come here." Alastor's tone had shifted into barely contained exasperation, his hand gesturing sharply. The movement was impatient, irritated, completely devoid of the careful pleasantness he usually maintained in public. "For god's sake."

Alastor's hands moved to Vox's collar without warning, his fingers working the tie knot with quick efficient movements that suggested extensive experience with formal wear. The touch was impersonal, purely functional, his attention focused entirely on the task rather than the person he was handling, but the proximity was overwhelming anyway.

Vox’s heart was beating in his ears, the sound so loud he was certain everyone nearby could hear it. Not because of the proximity or the attention, but because they were going to be running late. Time was slipping away in measurable seconds while they stood there, stalled, his tie being adjusted when they should have already been moving. The delay sat heavy in his chest, tightening with every moment that passed.

"There." Alastor stepped back after a moment, his hands dropping away as he examined his work. "Margaret made it significantly worse this morning. You should probably avoid letting her handle your ties in the future."

Vox's voice came out slightly strangled, his throat suddenly tight, the tie felt like it was choking him now. "Maybe you should just do it for me all the time then."

The suggestion was meant to be light, teasing, maybe slightly annoying. A joke about Alastor's obvious expertise compared to Vox's, and apparently Margaret's, complete lack thereof. Instead it landed awkwardly, Alastor's expression shifting into something that looked uncomfortably like he'd discovered something unpleasant stuck to the bottom of his shoe.

The transparency of the reaction was shocking in its directness. Alastor wasn't even trying to be polite anymore, wasn't bothering to hide his distaste behind theatrical pleasantness. The public performance had dropped entirely, leaving just pure, unfiltered disgust at the implication of providing regular personal assistance, his nose wrinkling slightly.

Vox felt something defensive and sharp rise in his chest before settling into resigned acceptance. Fair enough, actually. He felt the same negative way about Alastor most of the time. The constant needling, the casual dismissals, the way Alastor treated him like an inconvenient obligation rather than someone worth genuine engagement. The feeling was obviously mutual, had probably always been mutual, and there was something almost refreshing about seeing it displayed without pretense.

They were apparently both done pretending this relationship was anything other than mutually irritating.

The train lurched to its final stop, the sudden stillness after hours of movement creating momentary disorientation. Passengers began filing toward the exits, their voices rising in conversation as the platform came into view through the windows.

Margaret appeared at Vox's side, her suitcase in hand, her expression bright with excitement. "Ready?"

Vox reached for her suitcase before she could protest, his hand closing around the handle automatically. "Let me carry that for you."

"You're so sweet." Margaret rose on her toes, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek that probably left behind the faint impression of her lipstick. "Thank you."

They joined the slow migration off the train, bodies pressed together in the narrow aisle, everyone moving with the collective patience of people who knew rushing wouldn't actually speed up the process. The platform outside was crowded with arriving passengers and people waiting to board, the usual chaos of a busy station.

Hartford stretched beyond the platform, its buildings visible through the station's large windows. Unfamiliar territory, a city Vox had never visited before, full of unknown variables and potential disasters waiting to unfold.

The symposium hotel loomed in his mind, its phantom lobby already rejecting his nonexistent reservation, forcing him to admit yet another layer of deception to people who were increasingly seeing through his carefully constructed lies.

But that was a problem for after they arrived. For now, he just needed to get off this train and figure out what came next.

One disaster at a time.

Chapter 55

"What do you mean my room isn't booked?!"

Margaret's voice cut through the Hartford Arms' lobby with enough volume to make several other guests turn and stare. The sound bounced off the high ceiling, echoing back down at them. Vox could see heads turning, conversations pausing, the ripple effect of social disruption spreading outward from the front desk.

He stood several feet back with Alastor and Barbara, watching the situation unfold with detached fascination. His arms ached from carrying the heavy suitcases up from the taxi. The handles had dug into his palms during the walk from the curb, leaving red impressions that still throbbed faintly. His shoulders burned from hours cramped in those uncomfortable train seats.

The hotel clerk was a thin man in his fifties with wire rimmed glasses that kept sliding down his nose, forcing him to push them back up every few seconds. The gesture had probably become unconscious years ago. His hands were folded on the polished mahogany counter, his posture rigid.

"I apologize for the confusion, miss, but I'm not seeing any active reservation under your name on the list." His voice carried the patience of someone who'd delivered this news hundreds of times before. "If you could perhaps check with whoever made the booking, there may have been a miscommunication regarding the dates or the property location."

The suggestion was delivered gently enough, but the implication was clear. This was her problem, not the hotel's.

Margaret's cheeks had flushed bright pink, the color spreading down her neck in blotchy patterns. Her usual composed demeanor was cracking under the pressure. "I do have a reservation! The station booked it weeks ago, I confirmed the dates myself! This is completely unacceptable!"

Her voice had climbed another octave, getting shriller with each word, the sound scraping against Vox's skull. Other guests were staring now. A middle aged couple near the entrance exchanged meaningful glances, their postures shifting to better observe the spectacle. An elderly woman with a small purse clutched to her chest looked scandalized, her mouth pressed into a thin line of disapproval.

Vox felt Alastor shift beside him, turning slightly to observe the scene with polite interest. Not concerned exactly, just mildly curious about how this drama would resolve itself. His expression remained pleasant, his public performance smile firmly in place, tracking Margaret's rising panic.

Barbara had her hands clasped in front of her, her expression sympathetic. She looked ready to step in if needed, but was waiting to see if this would resolve itself naturally first.

Vox's attention drifted, looking around the lobby. The place smelled of furniture polish and expensive cigars, brass fixtures gleamed under electric chandeliers that probably cost more than Vox's annual salary, their light reflecting off marble floors that were probably installed when the hotel first opened. The walls were paneled in dark wood, absorbing sound and making the space feel simultaneously grand and slightly oppressive. Oil paintings hung at regular intervals, depicting landscapes and hunting scenes that nobody actually looked at.

A grandfather clock in the corner ticked aggressively, making each second feel longer than it should. The sound echoed in Vox's head, mixing with the dull pounding building behind his eyes. A migraine was forming. He could feel it, the pressure building in his temples.

He should probably do something. Step in, defuse the situation, play the helpful colleague. That's what a good boyfriend would do. Offer support, take charge of the crisis, demonstrate competence.

But the petty part of him, still irritated about the entire trip and the forced proximity and the general inconvenience of pretending to care about romantic development, wanted to let this play out a bit longer. Wanted to watch Margaret squirm, wanted to see how long it would take before she realized that making a scene in a hotel lobby wasn't going to magically produce a reservation.

The thought was mean spirited and unhelpful. He was being vindictive for no good reason, taking satisfaction in someone else's distress because his own situation was uncomfortable. Margaret hadn't done anything wrong except exist in proximity to his various deceptions.

But watching her panic still felt satisfying in a small, petty way that Vox wasn't particularly proud of but couldn't quite suppress.

Margaret was pulling out her purse now, fumbling with the clasp, her hands trembling slightly. The purse was expensive leather, probably a gift from her parents. She extracted a leather folio, flipping through pages with increasing desperation.

"I have the confirmation documents right here," she said, her voice still tight but gaining some strength from having physical evidence. "The station's secretary handled the booking, she sent me copies of everything."

That caught the clerk's attention immediately. His posture straightened slightly, his expression shifting from patient dismissal to actual interest. Physical documentation meant this might actually be a legitimate complaint.

"Documents? If you have written confirmation, that would certainly help clarify the situation."

Margaret blinked, like the concept of actually producing evidence hadn't occurred to her until this exact moment. "Oh. Yes. Of course."

Her hands moved faster now, pulling out several pages of official looking hotel letterhead, complete with typed details and what appeared to be an official stamp. The papers were slightly crumpled from being stored in her purse, but still clearly professional documentation.

The clerk accepted the documents with reverence. His eyes scanned the text, moving quickly across the typed lines. His expression changed almost immediately. Something between recognition and concern crossed his features.

"Ah, yes. I see the issue now." He set the papers down on the counter with deliberate care, arranging them precisely parallel to the counter's edge. His tone shifted, careful now, weighted with bad news. "Miss Holloway, this reservation was indeed made several weeks ago, as you stated. However, it required confirmation forty eight hours prior to arrival. Since we didn't receive that confirmation, the room was reassigned to another guest yesterday afternoon."

The words landed with flat finality. Vox watched Margaret's expression shift from relief at being vindicated to fresh horror at the new problem.

"Confirmation?" Her voice had gone higher again, disbelief mixing with mounting panic. "What confirmation? Nobody told me I needed to confirm anything!"

"It's standard hotel policy, miss. Outlined in the booking materials sent to your office." The clerk's tone remained professional but carried an undertone of exasperation now. "During symposium season, we experience very high demand. Unconfirmed reservations are automatically released to accommodate our waiting list. I do apologize for the inconvenience, but the policy is clearly stated in all our correspondence."

"But I didn't know!" Margaret's voice had taken on a desperate quality now, her composure completely shattered. Her hands had started to shake visibly, the papers rustling as she gripped them too tightly. "What am I supposed to do? I need a room! I'm here for the symposium, I can't just sleep on a bench somewhere!"

The pitch was getting sharper. Several more guests had stopped to watch, the lobby's ambient conversation dying down. Vox felt second hand embarrassment creeping up his spine, the discomfort of watching someone else's public breakdown.

"Do you have any rooms available?" Vox interrupted, his voice cutting through Margaret's rising panic with forced calm. He stepped forward, closing the distance to the counter, positioning himself slightly between Margaret and the clerk. "Anything at all?"

The clerk turned his attention to Vox with visible relief. Finally, someone reasonable. Someone who understood how hotels worked.

"Let me check our current availability. Though, I must warn you, the booking price would be much higher." He consulted a large ledger on the desk, his finger tracing down columns of handwritten entries. The pages were thick with ink, names and room numbers and dates filling every line in precise script. His finger moved methodically, checking each entry, his lips moving slightly as he counted.

The other guests had started returning to their own business now that the drama seemed to be winding down, though a few were still casting curious glances.

The grandfather clock ticked on. Vox's headache was getting worse, the pressure building behind his eyes in waves. But he kept his expression neutral, kept his attention focused on the clerk's methodical page turning.

"Yes," the clerk said finally, his expression brightening fractionally. A small smile appeared. "We do have one room available. A single queen, third floor, street facing. Not our premium accommodations but perfectly serviceable. Clean linens, private bath, all the standard amenities."

Relief flooded through Margaret's expression immediately. Her entire body sagged slightly as tension drained out. "I'll take it. Thank you. Thank you so much. I don't care if it's street facing, I don't care if it's a closet, I just need somewhere to sleep."

"Wonderful. Let me just get the paperwork started for you." The clerk was already pulling out registration forms, his movements quick and practiced now that resolution was in sight.

And there went Vox's emergency backup plan.

The realization hit him with the force of a physical blow, making his stomach drop, his mind racing through the implications.

Multiple disasters had just converged simultaneously. Margaret was going to take the only available room. That meant there were now zero rooms available at this hotel. Which meant Vox's nonexistent reservation would be exposed the moment he stepped up to check in. Which meant he'd be standing here in front of Margaret and Barbara and Alastor looking like

a complete idiot who hadn't actually booked accommodations despite claiming everything was sorted.

The humiliation would be spectacular. Sterling would hear about it somehow. These things always got back. His image of competent professional would shatter. Everyone would know he'd lied about having arrangements, would draw conclusions about his judgment and reliability. Unless...

"Actually," Vox said, the words emerging before he'd fully thought them through, "I'm assuming my booking didn't go through either then."

The clerk's attention shifted to him. "And your name, sir?"

"Vincent Whittman. But don't bother checking." Vox waved his hand dismissively, trying to project confidence he didn't feel. "If Margaret's reservation got cancelled for lack of confirmation, mine definitely did too. I'm with the television station as well. Our administrative processes aren't exactly known for thoroughness."

He let self deprecating humor color his voice, playing up the role of a poor, hapless employee victimized by his station's disorganized management. People related to that. Everyone had experienced administrative incompetence.

Margaret had turned to look at him now, her expression shifting from relief about her own situation to concern about his. Her eyebrows drew together, her mouth opening like she wanted to say something comforting but couldn't quite find the right words. "Vincent, oh no. I'm so sorry. This is terrible. I will have a stern talk with-"

"It's fine," Vox cut her off smoothly, waving away her concern. "Really. Not our fault hotel policies are unnecessarily complicated. How were either of us supposed to know they needed confirmation? Not our fault in the slightest."

He turned back to the clerk with his most charming smile. "So the room you just offered Margaret. That's the only one available?"

"Yes sir. I'm afraid we're completely booked for symposium week. Most hotels in the area are similarly occupied. The symposium draws quite a large attendance every year."

"Right. Of course." Vox let appropriate disappointment show in his expression while his brain calculated the next move, running through options with increasing desperation. "Well, that's unfortunate. Still, it's the end of the world. Margaret and I can share the room."

The silence that followed was profound and uncomfortable.

It stretched out for several long seconds, filling the space between them with awkward tension.

Margaret's face went from concerned pink to mortified red in the space of a heartbeat. Her mouth opened slightly in shock, her eyes going wide, her hands freezing mid motion.

Barbara made a small sound. Maybe a cough, maybe a suppressed gasp. Her own expression shifted into something between alarm and profound embarrassment. Her hand came up to her mouth, covering it delicately, her eyes darting between Vox and Margaret.

Alastor had gone completely still beside them.

The clerk's eyebrows had risen so high they'd nearly disappeared into his hairline, wrinkling his forehead in dramatic lines. His mouth opened slightly, his professional composure cracking with visible alarm. "Oh! You're married then? My apologies, I should have realized. Let me note that in the registration."

His hand was already reaching for a pen, ready to update the paperwork.

"No!" Vox said quickly, realizing his mistake half a second too late. The word came out too loud, too forceful, echoing slightly in the suddenly quiet lobby. "No, we're not married."

The clerk's eyes narrowed, eyebrows now furrowed. He leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping to something more urgent and scandalized. "Sir, I'm afraid I cannot permit unmarried individuals of opposite sexes to share accommodations at this establishment."

The words were delivered with the gravity of someone citing holy law.

"What? Why not?" Vox heard the frustration bleeding into his voice despite his efforts to stay calm. His hands clenched at his sides, his fingernails digging into his palms hard enough to hurt. "We're professional colleagues. We just need somewhere to sleep."

"It's hotel policy." The clerk's words were clipped now. His posture straightened, his expression hardening. "The Hartford Arms maintains certain standards of propriety and moral conduct. We have a reputation to uphold in this community. Allowing unmarried couples to cohabitate would reflect poorly on our establishment and could expose us to legal complications regarding public decency ordinances. I'm sure you understand, sir."

The explanation was delivered with absolute finality.

Vox felt his irritation spike, approaching actual anger, hot and sharp in his chest. "So what am I supposed to do then?" His voice had risen slightly. "You just said you have no other rooms. Margaret needs the available room. Where exactly am I supposed to sleep?"

The clerk's expression had shifted into genuine distress now. His hands fluttered slightly, a nervous gesture. "Oh dear. Oh dear, this is quite the predicament. Perhaps one of the other hotels in the area might have availability? Though I must warn you, most establishments book completely during symposium season. The Riverside Inn sometimes has last minute cancellations, they're about fifteen blocks east. Or the Maple Lodge, though that's considerably farther and not close to the symposium venue."

The suggestions were delivered with diminishing confidence, each one trailing off a little more uncertainly than the last. When no one responded, the group was left standing in a silence that grew steadily more uncomfortable, the air thick with it.

Barbara fixed her attention on the ceiling, craning her neck at an awkward angle as though she might find something there worth intense study, anything that would spare her from meeting anyone’s eyes.

Alastor remained infuriatingly composed. He observed the scene with detached interest, his expression unchanged, still pleasant and professional, as if none of this concerned him in the slightest.

"Come on," Vox tried again, forcing his voice into something more reasonable despite the irritation burning in his chest. He leaned forward slightly, lowering his tone. "It's not that big of a deal. We're professional colleagues who need a place to sleep for a few nights. Surely you can make an exception. We're not going to be doing anything inappropriate, we just need beds. That's it."

"I'm afraid not, sir." The clerk's voice carried absolute finality now. "Policy is policy. I could lose my position if I violated these guidelines. The management is very strict about maintaining our standards. I'm terribly sorry but I simply cannot accommodate that arrangement."

Margaret was beet red now, her hands twisting together with enough force that her knuckles had gone white. She looked like she wanted to sink into the floor and disappear forever.

Vox felt his mind racing through increasingly desperate options. He could take a taxi to every other hotel in the city, burning through what little money he had left searching for vacancy that probably didn't exist. He could sleep in the lobby, claim he was waiting for a late train and just camp out in one of those leather chairs until morning. He could find a park bench.

All terrible options. All humiliating in different ways.

"What's the issue?"

Everyone turned to stare at Alastor, who had stepped forward with casual authority. His expression was pleasant, mildly curious, suggesting he'd just noticed there was a problem and

couldn't understand why everyone was making such a fuss about something with an obvious solution.

The clerk seemed momentarily thrown. "Well, sir, we're just having a small problem with room availability and accommodation arrangements. Nothing to concern yourself with."

"I don't see a problem here," Alastor interrupted smoothly. His voice carried a theatrical quality that made everything sound reasonable. "Brothers in arms share accommodations all the time, soldiers bunking together, traveling businessmen splitting rooms to save costs, colleagues on assignment coordinating lodging. I don't see how this situation is fundamentally different from any of those perfectly acceptable arrangements."

He gestured casually toward Vox. "He can share the room with me. We're colleagues here for the same symposium, the same professional purposes. Perfectly appropriate arrangement that violates no moral standards or social conventions."

Vox's brain short circuited completely.

The words registered on some level, entered his ears and traveled to his brain where they were supposed to be processed into meaning, but the processing failed somewhere along the way. His mouth opened but no sound came out.

Share a room. With Alastor. Alastor was offering to share his hotel room.

Margaret and Barbara both looked profoundly relieved. The tension drained from their postures visibly, their shoulders dropping, their faces relaxing.

The clerk's entire posture relaxed as well. His expression shifted back to professional pleasantness. "Oh! Yes, of course. That would be perfectly acceptable. Two gentlemen sharing accommodations, nothing improper about that at all. Professional colleagues coordinating lodging, happens all the time during conference season. I simply didn’t wish to presume you’d be comfortable with the arrangement.”

He was already pulling out new registration forms, his movements quick and fluid. "Let me just update the paperwork and we'll have you both settled immediately. This will just take a moment."

What the fuck is going on? The thought screamed through Vox's mind with such force that he was briefly worried it might actually be audible. Alastor didn't like him. He had made that abundantly clear through every interaction and had spent the entire train ride barely tolerating his presence. And now, out of nowhere, he was volunteering to share sleeping quarters for four days.

There had to be an angle, some manipulation that Vox was not seeing, some reason this served Alastor's purposes. Or maybe, impossibly, Alastor was simply being genuinely helpful. But that did not fit with anything Vox knew about him. There was always an angle, always some calculation behind that pleasant expression. Yet try as he might, Vox could not make sense of it. His mind kept returning to the simple impossibility of the offer.

Alastor wasn't looking at him though. Was barely acknowledging his presence at all, just maintaining that pleasant expression while the clerk bustled around preparing keys and documentation.

"Here we are," the clerk said cheerfully, sliding two sets of keys across the counter. "Miss Holloway, you're in room 304. Third floor, quiet hallway, away from the street noise. Gentlemen, you're in 412. Fourth floor, end of the hall, very quiet location. Corner room, actually, bit more spacious than our standard accommodations. I think you'll find it quite comfortable. Do you need assistance with your luggage?"

"We can manage," Alastor said before anyone else could respond. "Thank you for your assistance in resolving this situation."

"Of course, of course. My pleasure to help." The clerk was beaming now. "Please don't hesitate to contact the front desk if you need anything during your stay."

The walk to the fourth floor happened in a blur that Vox couldn't quite track properly.

They had to take the stairs since the elevator was occupied, someone's luggage apparently too bulky to share the car. The stairwell was narrow and poorly lit, the carpet worn in the center from decades of foot traffic. Brass fixtures that needed polishing lined the walls at regular intervals. The wallpaper had a floral pattern, its colors faded.

Margaret and Barbara split off at the third floor with cheerful goodbyes and promises to meet for dinner later, their relief at escaping the awkward situation palpable in how quickly they disappeared. Margaret's voice echoed back, something about freshening up and meeting in an hour, but Vox barely registered the words.

Then more stairs, his legs burning from the climb, his suitcase getting heavier with each step. The fourth floor hallway stretched ahead, longer than the third floor, doors spaced farther apart.

Room 412 appeared at the end of the hallway exactly as the clerk had described. Quiet and isolated, far from the elevator and the stairs. Privacy, but also a longer walk every time they would need to leave. The door was solid wood, painted a deep burgundy matching the carpet, the brass numbers slightly tarnished but still clearly visible.

Alastor unlocked the door, his key sliding into the lock smoothly. He pushed the door open and stepped inside without looking back.

Vox followed, his suitcase feeling heavier than it had on the train, his body aching from travel and stress and accumulated anxiety. His shoulders protested as he lifted the case over the threshold.

The room was fine. Better than fine, actually. Considerably nicer than Vox's apartment.

A large bed dominated the space, covered in a burgundy coverlet. The bed frame was dark wood, solid and well made, probably original to the hotel. Two pillows sat precisely arranged at the headboard.

A dresser with a mirror sat against one wall, its surface empty except for a small lamp and a decorative vase. The mirror was large and clear. A small desk with a chair occupied the

corner near the window, positioned to catch natural light. A door presumably leading to a bathroom stood partially open, revealing white tile and gleaming fixtures. Everything was clean and organized and completely normal.

Except for the part where Vox was now going to be sharing this space with Alastor. That part was distinctly not normal.

The door clicked shut behind them, the sound somehow louder than it should have been.

"Alastor, listen," Vox started, setting his suitcase down beside the door and turning to face him. His mind was still trying to catch up, still trying to process what had just happened and what it meant.

"Don't mention it." Alastor's voice cut through whatever Vox had been about to say, sharp and decisive. He was already removing his coat, shrugging it off his shoulders with smooth movements, hanging it in the small closet beside the door with precise care. The coat hanger clinked softly against the rod.

"But you'll need to find another room tomorrow," Alastor continued without turning around. "I just hated seeing you harass that poor woman down there."

The accusation landed hard. Vox's jaw tightened, his teeth clenching. "I wasn't harassing her. I was trying to solve a practical problem."

"You suggested sharing accommodations with your girlfriend in a public hotel lobby." Alastor turned now, his expression pleasant but something underneath had sharpened. His eyes were hard despite the smile. "Several times over, despite knowing it would embarrass her and violate obvious social conventions. That's either profound social incompetence or deliberate disregard for her comfort."

He moved to his own suitcase, setting it on the luggage rack near the dresser. "And it wouldn't be the first time either. I've watched you put people around you in uncomfortable situations multiple times now, always with that same oblivious expression like you genuinely can't understand why anyone's bothered."

Vox opened his mouth to argue, to defend himself. The words formed in his throat.

"Either way, it needed intervention," Alastor continued, not giving him space to respond. His hands were already working the latches on his suitcase. "You really need to learn manners. Basic social awareness would serve you well."

Alastor pulled out a small leather toiletry bag, examining its contents briefly before setting it aside. "I'm going to shower now. You can unpack or spend times with others in the lobby or whatever else you want to do. Just behave while I'm gone."

He disappeared into the bathroom without looking back, without waiting for response. The door closed behind him. The lock clicked.

Vox stood there for a long moment, staring at the closed bathroom door.

Then he walked over to the bed and collapsed onto it face first, letting his body weight carry him down without resistance. The mattress was considerably softer than his bed at home, the springs giving way without protest. The coverlet smelled faintly of laundry soap and something floral, lavender maybe.

The fabric pressed against his face, soft and smooth. He could feel the individual threads if he focused.

The thought bubbled up from somewhere deep in his consciousness. He was sharing a hotel room with Alastor. Was going to be sleeping in the same bed as Alastor, presumably, since there was only one bed and requesting separate sleeping arrangements would raise questions he didn't want to answer.

He had to admit that this might have been interesting back then, might have made him not feel miserable even. Back when proximity to Alastor felt like victory, like progress toward some goal he couldn't quite articulate.

But now he was just dreading it.

Any bed Alastor slept in probably had murder residue on it. Microscopic blood particles that never fully washed out of fabric, invisible to the naked eye but absolutely present on a molecular level. All those little protein chains from decomposing tissue, settling into the mattress fibers where no amount of washing could reach them. Sharing sleeping space with someone who regularly commits homicide was probably a health hazard. What if Alastor had diseases? Hepatitis from blood exposure, or worse things that Vox didn't have names for but could imagine in vivid detail.

And Alastor probably snored. Loud and obnoxious, making sleep impossible. Like a chainsaw, or a dying engine, some mechanical grinding noise that would echo in the small room all night long. Vox would be lying there all night listening to Alastor's respiratory system malfunctioning while trying not to think about the knife hidden in his own suitcase.

Plus Alastor probably hogged blankets and would leave Vox freezing on the other side of the bed. Would pull and tug, leaving Vox with maybe a corner if he was lucky.

Probably kicked too. Would thrash around all night like he was fighting imaginary enemies, his limbs everywhere, no concept of personal space even while sleeping. Just random violence in all directions, elbows and knees connecting with Vox's ribs at unpredictable intervals.

Vox frowned, burying his face deeper into the bedcovers, feeling a strange flicker he didn’t entirely enjoy.

The rationalizations were getting increasingly absurd but Vox clung to them anyway, building a mental wall of disgust and irritation to insulate himself from the uncomfortable awareness that none of these reasons were why he was actually bothered.

Water started running in the bathroom, the sound of the shower softened by the wall between them. The pipes groaned as pressure built, a familiar, almost intimate noise in the quiet room. Steam would be gathering in there now, fogging the mirror, Alastor standing beneath the

spray. Vox lingered on the thought a beat too long before catching himself, jaw tightening, forcing his attention elsewhere like the idea itself had overstepped.

He should probably unpack. Should hang up his clothes so they wouldn't wrinkle more than they already had. Should prepare for tomorrow's symposium events like a functional adult.

Instead he just lay there, face pressed into the coverlet, breathing in laundry soap and floral something while his brain spiraled through increasingly strange and hypothetical scenarios.

The shower ran for what felt like an eternity. Vox rolled onto his back eventually, his face getting uncomfortable from being pressed into fabric, staring at the ceiling which was significantly nicer than his apartment ceiling.

No water stains here, no cracks spreading across plaster like spiderwebs, no patches where previous repairs had been poorly matched. Just smooth painted surface that probably got maintained regularly.

His eyes traced imaginary patterns in the ceiling's texture anyway, his mind drifting. The symposium started tomorrow with technical demonstrations and networking events that Vox had no real interest in attending but would have to attend anyway to maintain appearances. Sterling would expect a report about radio station innovations. Margaret would expect him to escort her to various social functions. Alastor would expect what exactly? That Vox would stay out of his way? Vanish entirely until the trip concluded?

The bathroom door opened suddenly, releasing a cloud of steam carrying the scent of expensive soap and shampoo. Not the cheap stuff Vox used at home. This was proper hotel soap, probably costing more per bar than Vox spent on toiletries in a month.

Alastor emerged looking considerably more relaxed than before, his hair slightly damp. He was wearing what appeared to be actual nightwear rather than just sleeping in his underclothes like a normal person. Proper matching top and bottom, probably expensive, tailored to fit properly. Probably had a whole suitcase dedicated to evening attire and grooming supplies.

Vox was still lying on his back, face toward the ceiling, not moving as Alastor crossed the room to his own suitcase. His body felt heavy, weighted down by exhaustion.

"Are you attending the evening networking event?" The question emerged before Vox had consciously decided to ask it, his voice sounding strange in the quiet room.

Alastor paused in his unpacking, turning to look at Vox with mild surprise. Like he'd forgotten Vox was even in the room. "No. I don't have to network. I'm well established in my field."

Vox couldn't help but let out a small scoff, rolling his eyes. Still, he had to admit to himself that Alastor wasn’t wrong.

Alastor had already returned his attention to organizing his belongings with meticulous care, each item finding its designated place in the dresser drawers. Vox watched him work, fascinated despite himself by the precision. Everything had a specific location, arranged just so.

Then Alastor paused again, his hands stilling mid motion, turning back to look at Vox with something like assessment. "Though you should probably go. Make connections, establish yourself with the other attendees. It would be good for your professional development."

The jab was subtle but present. Vox ignored it, focusing on bigger concerns than Alastor's casual condescension.

He couldn't go to the networking event. The conclusion was simple and unavoidable. If he left Alastor alone in this room, Alastor would absolutely go through his luggage. It was what Vox would do in his position. Efficient use of unsupervised time to gather intelligence about your enemy's intentions.

And the moment Alastor found the kitchen knife wrapped in a sock and hidden at the bottom of Vox's suitcase, he would draw completely reasonable conclusions about why someone would bring a weapon to a professional symposium.

And those conclusions would probably result in Vox waking up dead, if that was even possible. Or more likely, not waking up at all. Just Alastor hiding behind the door when Vox returned from the networking event, knife in hand, ready to eliminate the threat before it could eliminate him.

The paranoia was probably excessive. Alastor had no reason to murder him in a hotel where they were registered as roommates. Too obvious, too many witnesses, too much risk for someone who'd successfully avoided detection for years.

But probably wasn't definitely, and Vox wasn't willing to bet his life on Alastor's commitment to logical risk assessment.

"No," Vox said, his voice carrying false casualness. "I'll stay too. We can go together later if anything interesting comes up."

Alastor's hands stilled completely in the dresser drawer. He turned to look at Vox fully now, his expression cycling through several emotions too quickly to identify individually. Surprise, confusion, something like concern. "Together?"

The word came out flat, questioning.

"Yeah. I mean..." Vox scrambled for reasoning that wouldn't sound completely insane. "You know. We're roommates now. We work together. Makes sense to coordinate our schedules, attend events as colleagues rather than separately. Professional solidarity and all that."

The explanation was terrible and transparent and probably made him sound clingy. But it was still better than the alternative.

Alastor was staring at him now with undisguised confusion. His expression suggested he was trying to determine if this was genuine social incompetence or some manipulation he hadn't identified yet.

"You want to stay here," Alastor said slowly, testing the words. "In the room. With me. Instead of attending networking events that could benefit your career."

"Yes."

"Why?"

The question was simple and direct and completely impossible to answer honestly.

"I just..." Vox heard himself floundering. "I'd rather stay. We're roommates. Colleagues. Makes sense to..."

He trailed off, unable to construct coherent justification.

"I don't know. I just don't want to go alone."

The words came out different than he intended, carrying an edge of plaintiveness he hadn't meant to include. Made him sound pathetic and desperate.

The silence that followed was profound and uncomfortable.

Alastor's expression had shifted into something Vox couldn't quite read. Not disgust exactly, though that was certainly present in the tightness around his mouth. Something more complicated. Wariness mixed with confusion mixed with what might have been genuine concern about Vox's mental stability.

From Alastor's perspective, this probably looked bizarre. Deeply weird behavior. His contractor insisting on staying in their shared room instead of attending professional events,

citing vague reasoning about wanting to coordinate schedules, demonstrating clingy behavior that Alastor had already identified as problematic multiple times.

Vox would rather have Alastor think he was pathetically clingy than have Alastor find the knife and think he was actively dangerous. Would rather be seen as socially incompetent and desperately needy than as a potential threat that needed to be eliminated.

So he committed to the bit, letting his expression slowly turn into something more vulnerable. Made his eyes wider, let his shoulders slump slightly, played up the desperate subordinate who couldn't function without supervision. The performance felt humiliating but necessary.

Alastor's expression solidified into something between pity and disgust, his mouth tightening fractionally, a small line appearing between his eyebrows.

"Suit yourself," he said finally, turning back to his unpacking with deliberate focus. "But I'm not entertaining you all evening. If you're staying here, you'll have to find ways to occupy yourself that don't involve bothering me. I need peace and quiet."

"That's fine," Vox said quickly, relief flooding through his chest despite the humiliation. "I brought reading materials. Work to review. I'll be completely unobtrusive. You won't even know I'm here."

Alastor made a noncommittal sound suggesting profound skepticism about Vox's ability to be unobtrusive. A soft huff that was almost a laugh but not quite. His attention remained focused on his suitcase, pulling out neatly folded shirts and arranging them in the dresser.

But he didn't kick Vox out or insist he leave for the networking event or question further why Vox was making such bizarre choices. Just continued organizing his belongings with meticulous care while Vox lay on the bed pretending the ceiling was fascinating.

The knife stayed safely hidden in Vox's suitcase, wrapped in its sock cocoon, its presence unknown, its implications unexplored.

Chapter 56

Alastor finished arranging his belongings, each item finding its designated place in the dresser drawers. His hands moved efficiently, smoothing down a folded shirt here, adjusting the angle of his toiletry bag there. The level of organization meant this was something he did every time he traveled, a ritual performed without conscious thought.

Vox watched from his position on the bed, his body still sprawled face up, his eyes tracking Alastor's movements with detached interest. The ceiling had gotten boring, and watching someone else be productive felt better than contemplating his own growing list of failures and deceptions. At least Alastor's competence was entertaining in its own irritating way.

The room had settled into comfortable quiet, just the soft sounds of fabric sliding against wood, the occasional clink of glass bottles being arranged, the distant muffled noise of other hotel guests moving through hallways. The steam from Alastor's shower had dissipated, leaving behind only the lingering scent of expensive soap.

Vox's headache had faded to a dull throb, manageable now that he wasn't standing in a crowded lobby watching Margaret have a breakdown. His body had started to relax into the mattress, the tension draining from his shoulders and back. The bed was genuinely comfortable, the mattress firm enough to be supportive without being hard, the coverlet soft against his skin.

He could fall asleep right here. Could just close his eyes and let exhaustion take over, deal with unpacking and preparations tomorrow morning when his brain was functioning better.

Alastor closed the dresser drawer with a soft click, the sound somehow final. He turned around, facing the bed where Vox still lay sprawled, his expression shifting from focused concentration to something more direct.

"Alright." His voice cut through the quiet with unexpected sharpness. "Off."

Vox blinked, his brain taking a moment to process the command. "What?"

"I need to sleep so I can be up early for tomorrow." Alastor gestured toward the bed with one hand. "Get out of the bed."

The words landed with the casual authority of someone used to being obeyed without question. Not aggressive exactly, just matter of fact.

Vox rolled over, pushing himself up onto his elbows, his confusion genuine and rapidly transforming into incredulity. "Wait, what? Where am I supposed to go then?"

He'd been lying here for the past twenty minutes while Alastor unpacked, had assumed that the sleeping arrangements were settled, that sharing the bed was the implicit agreement they'd reached when Alastor had offered to share the room in the first place.

"Didn't you say we'd share?" Vox continued when Alastor didn't immediately respond. "You literally told the clerk downstairs that colleagues share accommodations all the time. That was your whole argument for why this arrangement was acceptable."

Alastor's expression remained pleasant, his smile fixed in place, but something in his eyes had sharpened. "I said I'd share the room. I didn't specify that I'd share the bed. Those are two different things entirely."

"You can't be serious." Vox sat up fully now, his legs swinging over the side of the bed, his feet finding the floor. The carpet was thick under his socks, plush and well maintained. "You offered to let me stay in your room but not actually sleep in the bed? What's the point?"

"The point is that you have accommodations." Alastor's tone had taken on a lecturing quality, patient in the way teachers were patient with students who weren't grasping obvious concepts. "You're not sleeping on a park bench or wandering the streets looking for vacancy. You have a roof over your head, a private space to keep your belongings, access to facilities. That's considerably better than the alternative, wouldn't you say?"

Vox felt heat rising to his face, anger mixing with embarrassment and mounting frustration. "It's my bed too! You can't just kick me out!"

"It's not your bed." Alastor's voice remained calm, almost conversational, which somehow made it worse than if he'd been actively confrontational. "It's my room and my bed. I was gracious enough to share the room with you when you found yourself in an unfortunate situation of your own making. But that doesn't entitle you to equal claim on all the amenities."

The logic was infuriating in how internally consistent it was. Alastor had solved Vox's accommodation crisis by offering room access, had never actually promised bed access, and was now pointing out this distinction like it was obvious and reasonable.

"You're not even sharing then!" Vox's hands clenched into fists at his sides, his fingernails digging into his palms hard enough to leave marks. "You're just letting me exist in the same space as you while you take everything for yourself! That's not sharing, that's just being slightly less of a complete asshole than you could be!"

His voice had gotten louder, the words coming out sharper than he'd intended. Some distant part of his brain registered that other guests might hear this argument through the walls, might complain to management about noise, but the larger part didn't care. This was absurd. This entire situation was completely absurd and Alastor was acting like Vox was being unreasonable for expecting basic human courtesy.

"If I'd known this I would have gotten another room earlier!" Vox continued, his frustration building momentum. "What the fuck, Alastor! Where am I supposed to sleep this late? It's almost nine o'clock, everything else in the city is probably booked, I don't have money to throw at expensive last minute accommodations even if I could find them!"

Alastor's expression was slowly becoming more and more amused, though he was keeping it controlled, his smile small and private. "I'm not kicking you out of the room, Vincent. You're being dramatic."

He gestured casually toward the floor, the movement so nonchalant it took Vox a moment to understand what he was indicating. "Sleep there. What's the issue?"

Vox stared at him, his mouth opening and closing several times as his brain struggled to process what he'd just heard. The floor. Alastor was gesturing to the floor. Was suggesting, with complete sincerity and apparent lack of awareness about how insane this was, that Vox should sleep on the floor.

"What are you saying to me right now?" The words came out strangled, disbelief making his voice go higher than normal. "You want me to sleep on the floor? Like a dog?"

"I don't see how that comparison is relevant." Alastor's tone remained maddeningly reasonable. "Many people sleep on floors. It's a perfectly common sleeping surface in various cultures and contexts. The carpet here is quite thick, considerably more comfortable than many beds I've encountered. You'll be fine."

Vox felt his jaw drop, literally felt his mouth falling open in shock. "Are you fucking serious right now? You're genuinely suggesting I should sleep on the floor of a hotel room while you take the entire bed for yourself?"

"Yes." Alastor tilted his head slightly, his expression suggesting genuine confusion about why this was causing such strong reaction. "Have you never slept on a floor before?"

"No! Why would I?" Vox's hands came up, gesturing wildly, his body language expressing the incredulity his words couldn't fully capture. "I'm a human being with access to beds! People sleep on beds! That's what beds are for!"

"Well." Alastor's smile had widened fractionally, that private amusement becoming more visible despite his apparent attempts to keep it contained. "First time for everything then."

They stared at each other for a long moment, the silence stretching out between them. The room felt smaller suddenly, the air thicker. Vox could hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears, could feel the heat of anger and embarrassment spreading across his skin.

Alastor looked genuinely entertained, clearly finding this entire situation amusing, which just made Vox want to throw something at his head.

"I don't want to sleep on the floor," Vox said finally, his voice flat, trying to inject some authority into the statement. This conversation was ridiculous. He wasn't sleeping on the floor. That was absurd and Alastor needed to stop being deliberately obtuse about basic social conventions.

Alastor sighed, the sound carrying theatrical exasperation. "Vincent." He drew out the name, making it sound like a gentle chiding. "I don't want to do a lot of things too. Life isn't always fair. Sometimes we have to make small sacrifices for the greater good."

He moved toward the bed as he spoke, his movements fluid and purposeful. "Now stop being difficult. How am I supposed to sleep if you're in my bed? I require proper rest to function tomorrow."

Vox's jaw dropped again, his disbelief reaching new heights. "Are you suggesting you don't see any other way this can work? Another way that doesn't include me sleeping on the floor?"

"I don't see what other arrangement would work." Alastor had reached the bed now, standing at the opposite side from where Vox sat. "Are you suggesting I sleep on the floor? That would be rather strange, wouldn't it? Making a guest sleep in the bed while the host takes the floor seems backwards."

"You can't be this dense." Vox stood up abruptly, his body moving before his brain fully decided on action. He was too agitated to sit still, needed to be on his feet, needed the physical outlet for the frustration building in his chest. "You said it yourself! Brothers in arms share sleeping arrangements! Soldiers bunk together! That was your entire argument downstairs!"

He gestured emphatically toward the door, toward the lobby they'd left behind. "You told the clerk that sharing a bed was perfectly normal and appropriate for colleagues! And now you're acting like the very concept is foreign to you! You're just being obtuse on purpose!"

"I don’t recall either of us being soldiers. You’ll forgive me if I don’t consider us brothers in arms," Alastor said, his voice carrying traces of amusement he wasn't bothering to hide anymore. "What I said to the clerk was to resolve a logistical situation. What actually happens in this room is a separate matter with separate considerations."

The admission was delivered so casually, so matter of factly, that it took Vox a moment to process the implications. Alastor had said whatever was necessary to solve the immediate problem without any intention of following through on the implied arrangement. Had offered to share the room knowing full well he had no intention of actually sharing the bed.

Vox opened his mouth to argue further, to point out the blatant dishonesty, to demand basic human decency, but the words died in his throat. What was the point? Asking Alastor for basic human decency was like asking the earth to stop spinning. Alastor knew exactly what he was doing, found it amusing, and clearly had no intention of changing his position regardless of how many logical arguments Vox presented.

The staredown continued for several more seconds. Alastor's expression remained pleasant, amused, completely unmoved by Vox's obvious distress. Vox's expression was cycling through various stages of disbelief and anger, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides.

Finally Alastor moved, pulling back the coverlet, settling himself into the bed like this was already decided. His movements were relaxed, unhurried, demonstrating complete confidence that this argument was over and he'd won.

Vox stood there for another moment, watching Alastor lean comfortably against the pillows, settling in for the night without further discussion.

Then Vox looked at the floor. The thick carpet, plush and well maintained but still fundamentally a floor. A surface designed for walking, not sleeping. Hard underneath the decorative layer, lacking the give and support of an actual mattress.

He was really going to sleep on the floor. This was actually happening.

The realization settled over him like physical weight, making his shoulders sag. His earlier anger drained away, replaced by resignation and bone deep exhaustion. He was too tired to keep fighting, too worn down by the entire day's accumulated disasters to sustain righteous indignation.

With a quiet, defeated huff, Vox moved toward the floor. He lowered himself gingerly, as if even the motion might demand more energy than he had left, and stretched out beside the bed. The carpet felt thin and unyielding beneath him. He shifted once, then again, before finally settling and resting his head directly against the floor, wincing at the immediate discomfort.

"Can I have a pillow at least?" The words came out quieter than he'd intended, defeat evident in his tone.

Alastor didn't respond verbally. His hand simply reached out, grabbing one of the two pillows from the bed. He held it over the edge for a moment, then let it drop.

The pillow fell through the air and landed directly on Vox's face with soft impact, obscuring his vision momentarily. The gesture was so deliberately childish, so unnecessarily antagonistic, that Vox felt his anger spike back to full strength immediately.

He shot upright, grabbed the pillow and threw it back onto the bed with more force than necessary, the soft object not making the satisfying impact he wanted but still expressing his frustration. "Give it to me properly!"

From the bed, he heard Alastor huff. The sound was dismissive, almost a laugh but not quite. Then movement, the mattress creaking as Alastor rolled over to face the wall, turning his back to where Vox sat.

"Goodnight, Whittman." The words were delivered with casual finality, like this conversation was over and further discussion would not be entertained.

Vox sat there for a moment, staring at Alastor's back, his hands still clenched into fists. The anger was still there, burning hot in his chest, but overlaid with exhaustion and the growing

realization that he had no leverage here. No way to force Alastor to be reasonable, no method of compelling basic human courtesy.

Vox looked at Alastor's back, visible at his eye level from this new floor perspective. The expensive nightwear, freshly washed hair, the relaxed posture, the complete comfort of someone who'd gotten exactly what he wanted.

"Don't goodnight Whittman me," Vox said, his voice carrying more bite than before. "Give me the pillow properly."

Alastor didn't respond. Didn't move, didn't acknowledge the request, just continued lying there facing the wall like Vox had ceased to exist entirely.

The silence stretched out, heavy and uncomfortable. Vox waited, giving Alastor time to respond, to acknowledge, to do literally anything other than ignore him. But nothing came. Just the quiet sound of Alastor's breathing, steady and even, deliberately calm.

"You know, this is great." Vox heard himself saying it out loud, the words emerging without conscious decision. "Our first night together and it's already a disaster."

The phrasing registered half a second after the words left his mouth, making his skin prickle with embarrassment.

Alastor's head turned, his body still facing the wall but his face now visible in profile. He was frowning, his expression cycling through several emotions too quickly to identify. Confusion, maybe. Discomfort, definitely. Something else underneath that Vox couldn't parse.

"Are you always like this or do you just hate me more than the others?" Vox continued, trying to move past the awkward phrasing by pushing forward into different territory. "Because I genuinely can't tell if this is your baseline personality here or if I've done something specific to earn special contempt."

Alastor's frown deepened fractionally before smoothing out into something more neutral. He rolled onto his back, his eyes finding the ceiling rather than looking at Vox directly. "I don't hate you."

The statement was delivered flatly, without particular warmth but also without any obvious hostility.

"You're just difficult to deal with when you behave like this." Alastor's hands were now folded across his stomach, his posture still relaxed despite the conversation. "Constantly seeking reassurance, making demands, creating issues where none needs to exist."

The silence returned, heavier this time. Vox could hear distant sounds from other rooms, muffled conversations through walls, someone walking down the hallway with heavy footsteps. The hotel settling around them, full of people sleeping in actual beds like civilized humans.

"Are you upset that you're not sharing a room with Margaret?"

Alastor's voice cut through the quiet unexpectedly, making Vox's head snap up. The question was delivered with studied casualness, like idle curiosity rather than genuine interest.

“Is that why you’re acting out?” Alastor went on when Vox didn’t immediately respond. “Disappointed about the sleeping arrangements in more than one sense?”

Vox stared at him. “What?”

Alastor’s smile widened just a fraction, pleased with himself. “You wanted to sit with your girlfriend. You wanted to share a bed with her. Instead, you’ve been stranded with me, and now every inconvenience has become a personal affront.”

The explanation landed too smoothly, as if Alastor thought he had caught Vox in a lie. Vox felt a spike of irritation followed by something more disorienting. Alastor did not buy the

Margaret story. He knew that. Had known it for a while now, from the way Alastor spoke about the two of them like he was humoring a transparent lie. So why lean on it now?

“That’s not what this is,” Vox said. “Is that honestly what you think?”

“I think you’ve been irritable all day,” Alastor replied lightly. “And pushy.”

“I’m not being pushy,” Vox snapped. “What are you even talking about?”

Alastor’s smile sharpened, smaller now, edged. He didn’t look at Vox, his gaze drifting back to the ceiling as if the conversation no longer required his full attention. “You are,” he said mildly. “And not just with her.”

Something about that hit wrong. Alastor sounded entertained, almost smug, like he’d deliberately chosen the most irritating interpretation available and was enjoying watching Vox react to it.

The silence returned, but it felt different now. More awkward, more weighted with things unsaid. Vox waited for Alastor to respond, to say something that would clarify his reaction, but nothing came.

Minutes passed. The building settled around them, creaking softly as old wood and plaster adjusted to changing temperatures. Vox's body was starting to stiffen from laying on the floor, his muscles protesting the unnatural position.

He should probably try to sleep, close his eyes and let exhaustion take over. Tomorrow would bring new disasters and complications that he'd need energy to navigate.

Vox stretched out on the floor, his body extending along the carpet in the space between the bed and the window. The floor was cold despite the carpet, the chill seeping through his clothes and into his skin. His head rested directly on the carpet without benefit of the pillow still sitting on the bed above him, the rough texture scratching against his cheek.

This was humiliating. Lying on the floor of a hotel room while Alastor sprawled comfortably right next to him. Being treated like an unwanted pet that had to make do with scraps. Accepting this arrangement because the alternative was worse, because he'd backed himself into corners through lies and deceptions and couldn't extract himself without revealing too much.

His knife was still in his suitcase. Still hidden, still secret, still a disaster waiting to happen if Alastor ever found it. All his various lies were stacking up, piling higher, becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. Sterling's spy mission, David's unpaid labor, Margaret's fake relationship, the transmitter project itself.

And now this.

Vox closed his eyes, letting the darkness behind his eyelids replace the dim hotel room. His body ached, his pride was battered, his situation was absurd.

Here he was in Hartford, sharing a room with Alastor, positioned exactly where he could only dream to be just a few weeks ago. The humiliation made his blood boil but he couldn't deny that the opportunity was invaluable.

He'd take what he could get.

The carpet smelled off. The floor was hard against his shoulder, his hip, his leg. The room was too quiet, the silence broken only by Alastor's steady breathing from the bed above.

Vox lay there for a long time, waiting for sleep that didn't want to come, his mind churning through everything that had happened and everything that might happen tomorrow.

Eventually exhaustion won out over discomfort. His thoughts slowed, became less coherent, drifted into fragmentary images and sensations. The darkness behind his eyelids deepened, pulled him down, offered escape from consciousness and its accumulated indignities.

Chapter 57

The hotel room was quiet except for Vincent's deep and rhythmic breathing, suggesting he wouldn't be waking any time soon. Alastor stood near the dresser, deliberately opening and closing drawers with more force than necessary, the wood making sharp clicking sounds that should have been enough to rouse anyone sleep.

Vincent didn't stir.

Alastor pulled out his clothes with exaggerated movements, shook out his coat, let his shoes drop to the floor with distinct thuds. Nothing. The man remained motionless on the carpet, his breathing unchanged, apparently dead to the world, almost to the point of medical concern.

The loyalty test had been set in motion two weeks ago, carefully orchestrated through channels that would make it look mostly organic.

The false information had been simple to plant. A casual comment to Marcus in accounting about "revolutionary frequency modulation techniques" during a budget discussion. Marcus was competent at his job but catastrophically bad at keeping information confidential, especially after his second drink at the bar he frequented Thursday evenings. The man probably felt important when he could share insider knowledge with strangers who seemed impressed by his access to radio station secrets.

From there, the information would spread through predictable networks. Equipment vendors who supplied both radio and television stations, advertising coordinators who worked across both departments, industry contacts who attended the same professional mixers. Eventually it would reach Sterling through multiple seemingly independent sources, each one confirming details about the radio station's "breakthrough" modulation technology.

Technology that didn't actually exist, of course. The specifications were sophisticated enough to seem legitimate but it was fundamentally flawed, making actual implementation

impossible. Anyone who tried to build it would waste months and considerable money before realizing the entire concept was meaningless.

If Sterling assigned Vincent to investigate, if Vincent successfully gathered this false intelligence and reported it back, Alastor would know with certainty that his trust had been misplaced. The betrayal would be undeniable, Vincent's intentions revealed through his own actions.

And the consequences would be final. The real transmitter project was probably already compromised anyway if Vincent was reporting to Sterling, which meant continuing the arrangement would serve no purpose. Alastor could finish the work without Vincent's involvement, given that Alastor was just as competent as him. He could hire an engineer who would be skilled enough to work independently and cause him considerably less issues than Vincent had.

Vincent's death would need to appear unrelated to their association, of course. A mugging in one of Hartford's less savory neighborhoods would be straightforward enough to arrange. The city had areas where violence was common and a man carrying obvious signs of money would attract the wrong kind of attention. A few strategic comments to the right people about a wealthy television broadcaster passing by, maybe some exaggerated details about cash he carried for expenses, and nature would take its course.

The mugging scenario had appeal in its efficiency, but something about it sat wrong in Alastor's mind. The indirectness was prudent, certainly. The lack of connection between victim and perpetrator would make investigation difficult and leave no trail pointing back to Alastor specifically. It was smart.

But it was also unsatisfying in ways he couldn't quite articulate. If Vincent needed to die because he had betrayed their project, then Alastor wanted to be the one handling it directly. Wanted to see the recognition in Vincent's eyes when he realized how thoroughly he'd been outmaneuvered, wanted the personal satisfaction of ending a threat through his own capabilities rather than farming it out to random street criminals who wouldn't even understand what they were killing.

The thought was inconvenient. His alibi was the entire point of the transmitter project, and using it to kill the person who'd helped build it would be darkly ironic but strategically

questionable. Questions would be raised, connections would be drawn, the very tool meant to provide freedom would become evidence of premeditation.

Alastor moved to his suitcase with deliberate noise, unzipping it with sharp metallic sounds, pulling items out and setting them down with enough force to create distinctive impacts. Any normal person would be awake by now, disturbed by the obvious activity happening mere feet away.

Vincent remained perfectly still, his unconsciousness apparently impenetrable.

It was almost insulting. Here Alastor was making considerable effort to disrupt his sleep, trying to disorient him into waking confused and off balance, giving Vincent every opportunity to fail this test through sleep deprived poor judgment. But the man stayed asleep, oblivious to anything happening around him.

The irritation was irrational and Alastor recognized it as such even as he felt it building. He should be pleased that Vincent was this thoroughly unconscious, should appreciate having time to think through the various contingencies without interruption. Instead he found himself annoyed that his sleep deprivation strategy was completely wasted on someone who apparently slept like the dead.

He let out a long breath, walking to the window to look out at Hartford's darkened streets. The test was elegant in its simplicity. If Vincent was loyal, if his intentions were genuinely aligned with the project rather than with Sterling's interests, then the false information would die in whatever investigation Vincent conducted. Sterling would learn nothing of value, the television station would remain ignorant of the radio station's actual developments, and Alastor would know he'd been correct to entrust Vincent with increasingly sensitive work. And if not, Vincent's usefulness would be terminated along with his life.

The waiting was the difficult part. The test required time to develop, required Vincent to have opportunity to investigate and report, required Sterling's responses to filter back through the same gossip networks that had carried the false information outward. It could be weeks before Alastor knew with certainty which scenario was unfolding.

And in the meantime, he had to maintain the working relationship, had to continue treating Vincent as a valued collaborator while preparing contingencies for his potential elimination.

Had to watch for signs of betrayal while not revealing that he was watching, had to be ready to act decisively while maintaining plausible deniability about any premeditation.

It was exhausting, honestly. The constant calculation, the layered deceptions, the need to plan for multiple contradictory futures simultaneously. Much simpler when people were straightforwardly enemies or straightforwardly useful. This middle ground where Vincent might be either was requiring considerably more energy than Alastor preferred to expend.

Though if he was being honest with himself, which he tried to be in private moments like this, there was something else complicating the calculation. Something he'd been deliberately not examining too closely because acknowledging it would make the necessary contingencies more difficult to execute.

It would be a pity if Vincent turned out to be untrustworthy to this degree.

Not because Vincent was irreplaceable or particularly special in any objective sense. The man was a disaster at basic life management, clearly operating beyond his actual capabilities, prone to lies and deception that would inevitably collapse catastrophically. He was exhausting to deal with, socially inappropriate in ways that created constant minor irritations, obviously hiding significant aspects of his past that would probably be concerning if fully revealed.

But he was also genuinely competent. He'd successfully coordinated a complex project despite evident resource limitations, had managed the work effectively despite having no apparent experience with engineering supervision. The transmitter was actually progressing toward functional completion rather than stalling in theoretical development, which was more than Alastor had honestly expected when he'd first agreed to fund the concept.

And beyond the project utility, there was something entertaining about Vincent. The transparent desperation, the obvious manipulations, the way he threw himself at situations without thinking through consequences. It was like watching a trainwreck in slow motion, fascinating in its inevitable disaster but compelling in ways that straightforward competence never achieved.

Vincent had slept on the floor without protest beyond that one request for a pillow and had accepted the humiliation with resigned grace. Most people would have left and found other

accommodations or demanded better treatment or at minimum complained more extensively about the arrangement.

Vincent had just curled up on the carpet and passed out like it was perfectly normal to sleep on hotel room floors.

The absurdity of it would be almost endearing to others. That's probably how he had managed to get so close to Margaret. But not Alastor, since he wasn't inclined toward finding incompetent disasters endearing. That would be ridiculous and counterproductive.

Alastor let out another breath, this one longer and more frustrated than the first. He walked to the desk, this time pulling out his toiletries out of the drawer with deliberate crashes of bottles and containers against the table's metal frame. The sounds were startlingly loud now, beyond what could be considered normal evening preparation.

Vincent's breathing remained unchanged, deep and even and absolutely infuriating in its consistency.

"Unbelievable," Alastor muttered to himself, walking to the bathroom with his toiletries, closing the door with a sharp bang.

He took his time with his morning routine, opening and closing the medicine cabinet multiple times, generally creating as much noise as possible while maintaining plausible deniability about intentionally trying to wake anyone.

When he emerged fifteen minutes later, Vincent remained exactly as he'd been before. Same position, same deep breathing, same complete unconsciousness.

Alastor stared at him for a long moment, torn between admiration for that level of exhaustion and irritation that the disruption was having zero effect. The man looked like he was getting the best sleep he'd probably had in weeks, judging by his general appearance.

Well, the symposium would provide other opportunities for disorientation. The schedule was deliberately exhausting, packed with sessions and networking that would run from early morning until late evening. Vincent would be operating on inadequate sleep regardless, would be managing his meaningless relationship with Margaret while trying to investigate radio station technology while maintaining his cover story about legitimate interest in professional development.

Plenty of opportunities for him to slip up, to reveal his true intentions through behavior that couldn't be carefully controlled when he was stretched too thin.

And if he didn't slip up, if he somehow managed to maintain his various deceptions while avoiding reporting back to Sterling about the false modulation technology, then maybe the loyalty was genuine. Maybe Vincent was actually committed to the transmitter project for his own reasons, whatever those might be.

And if not, if he was simply *that* smart and entirely indifferent to the project, then Alastor supposed there was little he could do. That realization sat poorly with him. He was not accustomed to being outpaced, or to discovering that his leverage meant nothing. If Vincent had played him without effort, then all that remained was to accept it and resent the fact.

Alastor would know soon enough. The test was in motion, the pieces were positioned, the outcomes would reveal themselves through Vincent's own choices.

He turned from the window and crossed the room, already preparing to rouse Vincent for the morning meeting. There was no room left for speculation now. Vincent would wake, dress, and present himself as required, and in doing so make his next move whether he intended to or not.

Today would be interesting, one way or another.

- - -

Vincent dreamed of falling.

The sensation was visceral, his stomach dropping as gravity pulled him down through empty space. His arms flailed uselessly, his body twisting as he tried to orient himself, to find some reference point in the surrounding void.

Then the void resolved into light, brilliant and overwhelming, so bright it scorched his retinas even through closed eyelids. Vox squinted against it, his hand coming up to shield his eyes as his feet found solid ground beneath him.

The ground was a podium. A raised platform that put him several feet above floor level, circular and exposed on all sides. Around him rose tall rows of seats arranged in ascending tiers, an amphitheater designed to focus attention on whoever stood at the center.

The seats were occupied by figures whose forms seemed to shift and blur when he tried to focus on them directly. Vaguely humanoid shapes that gave off radiant light of their own, their features indistinct but their attention palpable and focused entirely on him.

They were talking over each other, their voices creating a cacophony of sound that made individual words impossible to distinguish. Arguments and commentary and what might have been laughter, all blending together into overwhelming noise.

"What the fuck?" Vox's voice came out hoarse and confused, his hands dropping from his eyes as he tried to make sense of the scene. "Where am I?"

The chattering stopped abruptly, the sudden silence almost as overwhelming as the previous noise. Then one of the more humanoid figures descended from the seats, its form solidifying slightly as it approached the podium.

"Hey there buddy!" The angel's voice was aggressively cheerful. "Good to see you again! Well, not see you exactly, but you know what I mean. Communication across dimensional barriers is always a bit weird. Anyway! We have some questions."

The angel settled onto the podium beside Vox, its proximity making his skin prickle with uncomfortable energy. It radiated power, making him acutely aware of his own powerlessness, his complete lack of leverage in whatever this situation was.

"So... Where are you?" The angel continued, not waiting for Vox to respond. Its tone had shifted from cheerful to slightly concerned, like a parent discovering their child wasn't where they were supposed to be.

Vox blinked, his brain struggling to catch up with the question. "What do you mean where am I? I'm in Heaven? Isn't this Heaven?"

"No!" The angel's voice rose with what might have been exasperation. "This is the administrative processing center for redemption cases. Completely different department. Very different vibe, you know? But that's not the point! The point is, where are you in real life? Like, right now?"

"I'm on a business trip." Vox's confusion was deepening rather than clearing. "Why? What's the problem?"

The angel's attention shifted to another figure still seated in the higher tiers. That second angel nodded once, some wordless communication passing between them that Vox wasn't privy to.

"The radio host." The angel's tone shifted, becoming more serious. It gestured and something appeared in the air between them, a projection showing Alastor. Walking, talking, smiling at someone off screen. "You know you can't be hanging around that guy, right? Like, that's bad. That looks really bad on your redemption file. Actively befriending someone like that is pretty much the opposite of what we're going for here."

"He's a colleague," Vox said smoothly, his posture becoming more confident despite the circumstances. "It would be strange if I didn't interact with him."

"Right, right, right." The angel nodded along, then its form flickered with sudden intensity. "So here's the thing we need to tell you, and this might come as a shock, but that man? He's a

serial killer."

The angel delivered this with the gravity of someone dropping a bombshell, clearly expecting horror or disbelief or some dramatic reaction.

Vox blinked. "I know. It wasn't exactly subtle."

The silence that followed was profound.

The angel's form brightened suddenly, genuine surprise radiating from it. "You knew? Wait, you actually knew? That's... huh." It turned again to look at the other angels, several of whom were now leaning forward in their seats with apparent interest. "He knew! Did you guys hear that? He actually knew the guy was a serial killer!"

"Well yeah," Vox said, his tone carrying defensive irritation. "It's Alastor. Of course I knew. How could I not know?"

One of the angels descended, larger and more solid than the first. It consulted what looked like a glowing tablet, scrolling through information with increasing concern.

"Well that's..." the first angel turned back to Vox, apparently at a loss. "That's actually impressive. Most humans don't notice until it's way too late. You've got good instincts."

"I've had practice," Vox said dryly.

"But that makes this worse!" The angel's cheerfulness had completely evaporated now. "You know what he is and you're still hanging around him? What are you-"

"Where are the normal angels?" Vox interrupted, his frustration building. "The competent ones? The ones who actually know what they're doing?"

Both angels turned to look at him with what might have been offense.

"If you mean the High Seraphim," the first angel said stiffly, "they don't handle remedial redemption cases. That's considered beneath their pay grade. Too much direct intervention required. So we handle it."

"You're telling me," Vox said slowly, "that my eternal salvation is being managed by middle management angels who got stuck with the boring assignments?"

"That's a very reductive way of putting it," the second angel said, its voice carrying wounded dignity. "We're highly trained professionals with extensive experience in human behavioral modification and spiritual rehabilitation."

"You're warning me only now, you didn't even know I was spending time with Alastor."

"We know now!" The first angel gestured at its tablet enthusiastically. "We've pulled his file. Very concerning profile."

Vox’s eyes narrowed. "Then why did you put him here with me? If he wasn’t around like last time, maybe I could have actually had a chance at being redeemed."

The angels paused, exchanging a strange look. "We didn’t."

Vox felt something cold settle in his stomach. "What do you mean? This is supposed to be a test or something, right? See if I can resist temptation, prove I'm genuinely reformed?"

The angels exchanged glances again, making Vox's skin prickle with growing alarm.

"We didn't put anyone with you," the second angel said carefully, its voice taking on a professorial tone like it was explaining basic concepts to a particularly slow student. "You're not in a created reality so we can't affect it quite so directly. You're in the actual world. A real timeline, just not your original one. It's more like... an alternate universe. One of infinite possible configurations where circumstances aligned differently."

The explanation landed like a physical blow. Vox stared at the angel, his mind racing through implications.

"Are you saying," he started, his voice coming out strangled, "that out of infinite possible realities, infinite potential configurations of how my life could have unfolded, I landed in the one where I have to deal with Alastor? Again?"

"We'll look into that," the first angel said, making a note on its tablet with gestures that suggested it wasn't taking the claim particularly seriously. "But that's not the immediate issue here. The immediate issue is that you're buddies with a serial killer, which is extremely bad for your redemption prospects. You understand that, right?"

Vox opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again. The truth was complicated and wouldn't help his case. Admitting he was building technology to enable more efficient murder would be disastrous. But he needed some explanation, an angle that would satisfy their concerns without revealing the full scope of what he was actually doing.

Vox straightened, his expression suddenly becoming more theatrical. When he spoke, his voice carried the smooth confidence of someone who'd spent decades doing this same exact thing.

"Gentlemen." He spread his hands in a gesture that managed to be both disarming and commanding. "I understand your concern. Really, I do. From the outside, this looks questionable at best. But let me paint you a picture of the actual situation here."

He started pacing, his movements fluid despite the strange environment. The performance was kicking in now, the part of him that had run hell's media empire surfacing through sheer habit.

"This man is careful. He's been operating for years without consequence because he's intelligent enough to avoid detection. The authorities have nothing on him. Nothing concrete or actionable. So he continues, and people continue dying, and the system continues failing to stop him."

Vox turned back to face the angels, his expression earnest. "Now, I could walk away. Could report my suspicions to the police with zero evidence and watch them do absolutely nothing with that information. Or..." He paused for effect. "I could actually do something useful."

"What kind of useful?" The second angel's voice carried suspicion.

"I'm building his trust." Vox's smile was charming, persuasive. "Getting close enough to learn his patterns, his methods, his routines. When you're trying to catch someone this careful, you need insider information. You need details you only get from proximity."

"That sounds dangerous," the first angel said.

"Oh, it absolutely is." Vox's grin widened. "But I'm very good at this. You know what I was in hell and what I was capable of. Those skills didn't disappear just because I'm human again. I'm just... applying them differently now."

He gestured broadly, warming to his performance. "See, he thinks I'm harmless. Some starstruck subordinate who can't see past the radio persona. He has no idea I'm cataloging everything. Every inconsistency, every suspicious absence, every detail that doesn't quite add up and building a case, brick by brick."

"And then what?" the second angel pressed.

"Then I hand it to the authorities on a silver platter." Vox's voice was smooth as silk. "Anonymous tip, documented evidence, everything they need to actually make an arrest that sticks. Clean, legal, no blood on my hands whatsoever."

The angels exchanged glances, clearly uncertain.

"Look." Vox's tone shifted, becoming more reasonable. "I get that this looks bad from your perspective. But think about the alternative. If I walk away, he keeps killing. More victims, more deaths, all because I chose the safe option over the effective one. Is that really what you want? Is that redemption?"

"We want you to not get involved with serial killers," the first angel said, though its conviction seemed to be wavering.

"Too late for that. I'm already involved." Vox clasped his hands in front of him, inclining his head. "The question is whether I use that involvement productively or whether I abandon it and let more people die. Those are the actual options here."

"You're very convincing," the second angel said slowly.

"I'm telling you the truth." Vox's expression was perfectly sincere. "I want to stop him. That's the whole point of everything I'm doing."

"And this technology you're building for him?" The angel's tone sharpened. "How does that fit into stopping him?"

Vox didn't miss a beat. "I was getting there. Once he relies on that technology, once he thinks it makes him untraceable, I'll know exactly how to expose it. I'll understand the system better than he does because I helped design it. When the time comes, I'll know exactly how to demonstrate to authorities how he's been using it."

"Or he uses it to kill more efficiently," the angel countered.

"Which gives authorities more evidence when I expose him." Vox's smile was confident. "Either way, it serves the larger goal."

The angels looked at each other again, that silent communication passing between them.

"There's something else that's bothering me about this situation," Vox said, his tone shifting into something more curious. "You keep talking about this man like he's just some random killer. But you realize who he is, right? Who he becomes?"

"A murderer," the first angel said flatly. "That's who he is."

"He's the Radio Demon." Vox let his incredulity show. "One of the most powerful overlords in Hell. You don't know this?"

The angels' forms flickered with confusion. The second one consulted its tablet, scrolling with increasing speed. "I don't have any record of that designation."

"Are you serious?" Vox stared at them. "He's a major player. One of the most feared entities in Hell. How do you not know him?"

"We're not exactly in regular communication with Hell's organizational structure," the first angel said defensively. "That's a completely different department."

"He and I were enemies." Vox gestured emphatically. "We fought for decades. He's the reason I..." He stopped, collecting himself. "My point is, we have bad history. Why in any version of reality would I be helping him?"

The angels went very still.

"You were enemies?" the second angel said slowly.

"Bitter enemies," Vox confirmed. "For decades. Ask anyone down there, they'll confirm the facts. You really think after all that, after everything that happened between us, I'd suddenly decide to become his helpful assistant?"

"That..." the first angel paused. "That does change the context somewhat."

"It changes it completely!" Vox pressed his advantage. "If we were allies in Hell, if we had a good relationship there, then sure, maybe I'd be helping him now. But we hated each other. He's the absolute last person I'd want to see succeed at anything."

The second angel was tapping rapidly on its tablet. "We'll need to verify this. Cross reference your Hell records with his current incarnation. That's not a simple check."

"Do verify it," Vox said smoothly. "Because once you confirm what I'm telling you, the whole picture makes a lot more sense. I'm not helping my old friend. I'm taking down my old enemy."

The angels exchanged another long look.

"This requires consultation with higher authorities," the first angel said finally. "The personal history angle, if verified, does put your actions in a different light."

"How long will that take?" Vox asked.

"Hard to say. Could be soon, could be a while. Interdepartmental communication is complicated."

"So what am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

"Be careful," the second angel said. "We're going to be watching more closely now. Your file's been flagged for additional monitoring."

"Monitoring I can work with," Vox said. "Just don't expect me to abandon the most effective path to actually stopping him."

"Sure," the first angel said. Its form was beginning to fade, the other angels following suit. "Don't make us regret giving you this much leeway, Vox."

"You won't regret it," Vox said with absolute confidence. "I promise."

"We'll be in touch soon," the angel said, its tone suggesting the conversation was concluding. "In the meantime, you need to get back. You're in an usually deep slumber and your body is starting to have stress responses about it."

The podium dissolved beneath his feet, the bright light fragmenting into painful shards that pierced through his closed eyelids. Vox felt himself falling again, that stomach dropping sensation of gravity reclaiming him, pulling him down toward something solid and real.

He woke with a jolt. His eyes snapped open to see dress shoes at his eye level, polished leather catching the morning light streaming through the hotel window.

His mind was disoriented, struggling to reconcile the angel encounter with his current location. The carpet beneath him was rough against his palms, his neck was stiff from sleeping at a weird angle, his mouth tasted terrible.

Alastor's voice cut through his confusion, measured and carrying faint annoyance.

"...and I know you're not asleep because only the dead sleep that soundly, so come on and get up now, Vincent. We will be late."

Vox blinked, his vision swimming as he tried to focus without his glasses. The details of the room were blurry, Alastor's face an indistinct shape above him. His hand moved

automatically to where his glasses should be on his face, finding nothing, panic spiking briefly before rational thought caught up.

"Finally," Alastor said, satisfaction evident in his voice. "I was beginning to think you'd actually expired during the night. Your glasses are on the nightstand. Get dressed. I had hotel staff iron your clothes while you were unconscious. We need to head out in twenty minutes or we'll miss the morning session."

Vox scrambled upright, his body protesting the movement with various aches and pains that came from sleeping on a floor. His hand found the nightstand, fingers closing around his glasses.

The world came into focus as he put them on. Alastor stood near the dresser, already dressed in fresh clothes that looked crisp and professional, his hair perfectly arranged, looking like someone who'd been awake and productive for hours while others slept.

"Twenty minutes," Alastor repeated, his tone brooking no argument. "There's coffee downstairs if you want it, but that comes out of your getting ready time. Your clothes are hanging in the bathroom. I suggest you move quickly."

Vox's mouth opened to respond, to maybe explain or protest or ask some meaningless question, but Alastor had already turned away, his attention shifting to his own final preparations.

Twenty minutes. Vox had twenty minutes to make himself presentable for a professional symposium after sleeping on the floor and having a bureaucratic angel interrogation in his dreams.

He lurched toward the bathroom, his body moving on autopilot while his mind tried desperately to process everything that had just happened.

The angels thought he was helping Alastor kill people. They were monitoring him more closely now. They might intervene if he didn't change his behavior in ways that looked less like collaboration and more like sabotage. And they didn't even know who the radio demon

was, which suggested either they were incompetent or this really was a different Alastor than the one he'd known in Hell.

The thought made his head hurt. He couldn't deal with existential questions about identity and alternate timelines on four hours of sleep and muscle aches. He needed to focus on immediate problems. Like getting dressed in twenty minutes and figuring out how to navigate the symposium without obviously spying for Sterling while also not getting flagged by angel observers for facilitating murder.

His clothes were hanging on the bathroom door exactly as Alastor had said, the wrinkles carefully pressed out by professional hands. The shirt looked better than it had when he'd packed it, the collar crisp and properly shaped, the fabric smooth.

Vox stared at it for a moment, trying to reconcile the image of Alastor calling hotel staff to have his roommate's clothes ironed with everything else he knew about the man.

Then he gave up on understanding and just started getting dressed. Understanding could wait until after he'd had coffee and recovered enough brain function to think about anything beyond basic survival.

Hartford was waiting, and apparently so was divine judgment.

Chapter 58

The hallway was narrower than Vox remembered from last night, the walls pressing in with their faded floral wallpaper and dim lighting. His shirt collar felt too tight despite being properly buttoned, his shoes too loud against the carpet, everything slightly wrong in ways that made his skin prickle with uncomfortable awareness.

The cheap wool suit was scratchy against his skin, the angel dream still rattling around in his skull, making him feel caged and observed. Like there were eyes on him from dimensions he couldn't see, waiting for him to slip up.

Alastor walked beside him with infuriating ease, his posture relaxed, his expression pleasant, looking like someone heading to a casual lunch rather than a professional symposium where every interaction mattered.

“Here is how this will proceed,” Alastor began, his tone carrying the particular patience of someone explaining difficult concepts to a child. “You will conduct yourself properly today. You will be polite. You will be professional. And you will refrain from monopolizing conversations with individuals attempting to network with attendees of actual relevance.”

Vox's hands were at his collar, fingers fumbling with his tie that had somehow come loose during the rushed dressing process. The fabric kept slipping through his grip, the knot refusing to form properly while he was walking. He'd been in such a hurry after waking up on the floor, his body stiff and aching, that he'd barely managed to get dressed at all.

"Don't pester the manufacturers with a thousand questions," Alastor continued, not waiting for acknowledgment. "They're here to demonstrate products, not indulge private lessons. Don't interrupt presentations, don't try to show off your technical knowledge, and for the love of god don't-"

"Yeah, I know." Vox tugged at the tie again, harder this time, the knot twisting wrong. Irritation was building in his chest, mixing with the overwhelming buzz under his skin.

Alastor glanced sideways at him, one eyebrow rising fractionally. His gaze lingered on Vox's fumbling hands fumbling with the increasingly mangled tie. "I don't know, do you?"

"Yes." The word came out sharper than intended. "I know how to behave at professional events."

"Because your track record for following basic social protocols is frankly questionable," Alastor pressed on, apparently determined to deliver his entire lecture. "And this is not the venue for your usual approach to professional relationships. These people have standards. They're not going to tolerate..."

Vox groaned, his fingers yanking at the tie knot. The more he tried to fix it, the worse it got. He was walking too fast, distracted by Alastor's droning lecture, his attention split between the tie and not running into walls, making both tasks impossible.

“For heaven’s sake.” Alastor stopped walking, reaching out toward Vox’s collar with casual familiarity. “You are such a mess.”

Vox's hand came up fast, smacking Alastor's away with more force than necessary. The contact was sharp, loud in the quiet hallway, the back of his hand connecting with Alastor's wrist hard enough to sting.

"I got it."

The silence that followed was profound.

Alastor's eyebrows shot up so high they nearly disappeared into his hairline, his expression turning into genuine shock, his hand still hanging in the air where it had been deflected, his entire posture radiating disbelief that someone had just physically rejected his assistance.

For a brief moment, Alastor looked completely knocked off balance. The pleasant radio host mask had slipped, revealing something more raw underneath. Confusion, maybe. Or offense.

Vox felt a strange surge of satisfaction. Good. Let him be surprised. Let him realize that Vincent Whittman was not as pathetic or incompetent as he appeared, that being treated like a nuisance, a dog, and an idiot in that order could still provoke a reaction.

“Right.” Alastor recovered after a beat, his smile even less convincing now. He lifted both hands in an exaggerated gesture of surrender and stepped back as though yielding the stage. His eyes, however, gleamed with undimmed interest, bright with something that might have been curiosity. “Of course. My mistake for overstepping.” He inclined his head slightly. “Please, do continue struggling with basic clothing. I am certain you will figure it out eventually.”

Vox returned his attention to the tie, his jaw tight, his fingers working faster now. The knot finally started to take shape, still not great but functional enough that he wouldn't look completely disheveled.

They resumed walking, the tension between them thick enough to cut. Alastor's silence was pointed, communicating disapproval without words, while Vox's attention remained fixed forward, determinedly not acknowledging the awkwardness.

The stairwell appeared ahead, and Vox spotted the third floor hallway branching off to their right. Margaret and Barbara's floor. He needed to play the good boyfriend, to be seen checking on Margaret.

"Hold on." Vox veered toward the third floor corridor without waiting for response. "I need to check if they're coming."

Alastor made a noncommittal hum but stopped at the stairwell landing, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, clearly waiting but not following.

Vox reached Margaret's door and knocked twice. Sharp raps echoed in the quiet hallway. No response came. He knocked again, louder this time, his head inclined close to the wood to

listen for movement inside.

Nothing.

He stepped back, frowning, then noticed the room service cart parked several doors down. The door to Barbara's room was propped open slightly, a uniformed woman visible inside stripping the bed with efficient movements. Fresh towels were stacked on the cart, cleaning supplies arranged in neat rows.

They were already gone. Had probably left earlier, punctual and properly prepared while Vox had been unconscious on the floor.

Vox returned to the stairwell where Alastor waited, his posture unchanged, eyebrows raising in silent question.

"They already left." Vox moved past him toward the stairs, his steps quick.

“How surprising,” Alastor said brightly as he fell into step behind him. “People who prepared properly and woke at reasonable hours managed to leave on time. A truly shocking development.”

Vox didn't dignify that with response, just took the stairs faster. The conference center was attached to the hotel through a series of connecting corridors, the architecture shifting from residential to corporate as they walked. The carpet changed from floral patterns to solid burgundy, the lighting became more clinical, the air smelled of coffee and that particular stuffiness of rooms designed for large gatherings.

They reached the main ballroom, its double doors propped open, the sound of conversation spilling out into the hallway. Vox paused at the threshold, his hand finding the doorframe, his breathing deliberately measured.

He needed a moment. Needed to flip the switch, to stop being Vincent the weatherman who slept on floors and got lectured about basic competence. The restless energy from the morning was still there, but he could use it. Channel that energy into performing the charismatic persona that had served him so well for decades.

Vox took one more breath, straightened his shoulders, centering himself.

Then he pushed through the doors and strode in with confidence that had nothing to do with his current circumstances and everything to do with muscle memory from back home.

The room was already half full, maybe forty people scattered in clusters throughout the space. Men in suits holding coffee cups, their postures relaxed but attentive, their eyes constantly scanning their surroundings for anyone interesting.

Vox didn't hesitate. He moved directly toward the nearest group, a cluster of three men discussing something technical near the refreshment table, leaving Alastor a half step behind. His smile was already in place, his energy becoming bright and magnetic.

"Gentlemen!" His voice carried enthusiasm without being overbearing, cutting through their conversation in a way that felt natural rather than intrusive. "I couldn't help but overhear something about signal processing. Are you discussing the new RCA demonstrations this afternoon?"

The men turned, their expressions cycling from mild surprise to interest as Vox inserted himself seamlessly into their circle. He extended his hand to the closest one, his grip firm, his smile charming and warm.

"Vincent Whittman, television side. First time at Hartford, figured I'd better introduce myself before I spend the whole weekend as 'that guy nobody knows.'"

The nearest man laughed, accepting the handshake with genuine enthusiasm. "George Patterson, from Boston. And don't worry about being unknown, half the people here are in the same boat. You work in television? That's fascinating, we don't usually get many television people at these radio events."

"That's exactly why I'm here," Vox said smoothly, already reading the room, cataloging the other men's body language and adjusting his approach accordingly. "Cross platform coordination is the future, right? Can't stay competitive if we're not learning from each other's innovations."

The second man nodded approvingly. "Smart thinking. I'm Walter Parker, independent contractor. Mostly work with smaller stations on equipment upgrades." He gestured to the third man. "And this is Harold Morrison, he's with the symposium organizing committee."

"Pleasure to meet you all." Vox's attention was already split, noting that Morrison's position meant he'd have useful information about the symposium schedule and key attendees. "Harold, I have to say, the program looks incredibly well organized. Must have taken months to coordinate all these presentations and demonstrations."

Harold's posture straightened slightly, pleased at the recognition. "Thank you, we did put considerable effort into curating the right mix of technical content and industry networking opportunities. It's a delicate balance, ensuring we serve both the equipment manufacturers and the broadcasting professionals who..."

Vox felt it then. A prickle on the back of his skull, attention focused and pointed. He didn't need to turn around to know Alastor was watching him from somewhere nearby, observing this interaction.

Right. Alastor probably wanted to actually engage with the crowd, probably expected Vox to fail at basic networking so he could step in and demonstrate proper technique.

It was time to flip that script entirely.

"Oh wait, hold on." Vox turned, scanning the room until he spotted Alastor, standing closer than he expected, looking oddly isolated despite the crowd. He gestured broadly, his smile widening with theatrical enthusiasm. "Gentlemen, let me introduce someone you definitely need to meet!"

He reached back and clamped his hand around Alastor’s arm, hauling him forward into the circle with more force than necessary. The gesture looked friendly, excited, the physical equivalent of an enthusiastic colleague sharing their social success.

"This is Alastor! Only the most popular radio host in the area, probably even beyond that honestly. If you haven't heard his evening program, you're missing out. The voice that launched a thousand dinner conversations, right here in the flesh."

Alastor's expression flickered. Just for a microsecond, something crossed his features. Surprise at being introduced by his supposed subordinate, at being pulled into a social situation he hadn't orchestrated himself, at having the dynamic reversed so publicly. Being knocked slightly off balance in a way he clearly hadn't anticipated.

But he recovered so quickly that Vox couldn’t be sure he hadn’t imagined it, his smile sliding into place with perfect smoothness, his posture adjusting to the suddenly shifted social dynamic with practiced ease.

Alastor’s voice carried that familiar theatrical warmth. “What a delight to meet you all."

“Alastor! I'd recognize that voice anywhere!” George's face had lit up with recognition. "I've heard your program. The evening broadcast, right? My wife absolutely loves it. She makes me turn it on every night during dinner. Says it makes the food taste better, though I think that might be pushing it."

The men laughed, the conversation flowing naturally now that everyone had been properly introduced. Walter launched into a question about broadcast equipment, Harold mentioned something about the afternoon demonstrations, George asked about Alastor's music selection process.

Vox stepped back slightly, his role in this particular social transaction complete. He'd gotten Alastor into the circle, had made the introduction, had established that they were colleagues rather than strangers. Now Alastor could take over, could charm these men with his radio host charisma or whatever.

It was finally time to find Margaret. Kill two birds with one stone: get out of Alastor's hair and maintain his fake relationship with Margaret in front of witnesses.

He extracted himself from the group with a casual "I should find my colleague, catch up with you gentlemen later," leaving Alastor mid sentence about frequency modulation techniques.

Margaret wasn't hard to spot. She stood near the far side of the room with Barbara and two men in expensive suits, clearly discussing something business related based on the way she gestured at the notepad in her hand. But what caught Vox's attention was the third figure in their group.

Robert Carmichael, the bitter drunk from the Holloway family dinner who'd spent the entire evening making pointed comments.

Except Robert wasn't being disruptive now. Wasn't bitter or confrontational or any of the things he'd been at the dining table. He stood slightly behind the two men, his posture smaller somehow, his voice quiet as he contributed to the conversation with careful professionalism. The barking dog had gone quiet in the presence of actual industry figures.

Vox approached, his energy shifting again into one of a doting boyfriend. He slid up beside Margaret, his hand finding the small of her back with familiar ease, his smile warm and affectionate.

"There you are," he said, his tone carrying gentle reproach mixed with relief. "I was starting to think you'd abandoned me to navigate this crowd alone."

Margaret turned, her expression brightening immediately. "Vincent! I was just discussing advertising coordination with Mr. Brennan and Mr. Foster. They're from nearby radio stations, we're comparing notes about regional market challenges and bundled advertising packages."

She gestured to the two men, both of whom Vox recognized as mid level executives. "This is Vincent Whittman. He works at the station."

"Pleasure to meet you both." Vox shook hands with the men, his grip firm, his attention tracking their reactions. They seemed impressed by Margaret's catch, their expressions approving.

Then Margaret's hand moved to Robert, who was watching Vox with sharp eyes. "And of course you remember Robert."

"Of course." Vox extended his hand to Robert with the same professional courtesy he'd given the two men, his expression pleasant but distant. Like Robert was just another face in the crowd.

Robert's handshake was firm, his jaw tight, his eyes tracking Vox's face with visible calculation. He was clearly trying to reconcile the confident, charismatic professional standing before him with the awkward weatherman he'd briefly met at the family dinner. His mouth opened slightly, like he wanted to say something, then closed again.

"Whittman," Robert said finally, his voice carefully neutral. "Didn't realize you'd be attending. I thought this was more radio focused."

"Cross platform coordination," Vox said smoothly, the explanation rolling off his tongue with practiced ease. "Can't stay competitive if we're not learning from each other's innovations. I'm sure you understand, being in the industry yourself."

The jab was subtle. A quiet reminder that Vox had a more legitimate reason to be here, employed by the television station and steadily climbing its ranks, while Robert, last Vox had heard, was still drifting between jobs, struggling to find his footing. Judging by the tension in his posture, Vox doubted that had changed. Robert carried himself like someone networking for survival rather than opportunity, angling for a way in instead of cultivating connections with future colleagues.

Robert's expression tightened fractionally before smoothing back to professional pleasantness. "Of course. Always good to see people taking initiative."

Mr. Brennan, one of the men, interjected before the tension could build. "You work in news, you said? What's your take on the recent ratings trends we've been seeing? The evening news slots seem to be pulling better numbers than morning broadcasts across most markets."

Vox launched into an analysis of viewership patterns, his decades of experience translating easily into insights these men found valuable. Margaret stood beside him, her hand occasionally touching his arm, playing the supportive girlfriend role while also contributing her own advertising perspective to the discussion.

Robert remained quiet, nursing what looked like coffee but might have been something stronger, his eyes never leaving Vox's face.

After maybe ten minutes, Vox gently extracted himself and Margaret from the group. "Could I steal you away for a moment? I wanted to grab a drink and catch up properly before the sessions start."

"Of course!" Margaret smiled at the men and Robert apologetically. "Gentlemen, thank you so much for the insights. Robert, I'll talk to you later."

Vox guided her toward the refreshments table, its surface covered with coffee pots and juice pitchers and small pastries that looked considerably better than what Vox usually ate for breakfast. He poured coffee for both of them, adding cream to Margaret's without asking because he'd observed her preferences enough times to know.

"So," Margaret accepted the cup with a grateful smile, her fingers brushing his as she took it. "How did you sleep? The beds here are supposed to be quite nice, much better than some of the places I've stayed for work events."

Vox felt his jaw tighten involuntarily before he forced it to relax. The irony of the question was almost funny. "Not great, honestly. Everything hurts."

The complaint was technically true even if the actual sleeping surface had been carpet rather than mattress. His back was genuinely protesting from a night on the floor, his neck stiff, his shoulders aching, making every movement uncomfortable.

"Poor thing." Margaret's expression became sympathetic, her free hand coming up to touch his arm gently, her fingers rubbing small circles through his jacket sleeve. "You should have said something this morning, I have painkillers in my room. I can get it for you if you need it. Or we could see if the hotel has-"

"Vincent."

The voice came from directly behind him, close enough that Vox nearly spilled his coffee in surprise. He turned to find Alastor standing there, his expression pleasant but his eyes carrying something harder underneath.

Margaret's grip on Vox's arm tightened immediately, her body angling slightly behind him. The movement was subtle but noticeable, instinctive, like she was using Vox as a barrier between herself and Alastor.

Alastor's attention shifted to Margaret, noticing her for what seemed like the first time. His smile widened, becoming warmer, more genuine than Vox had ever seen. "Oh, good morning, Margaret! How lovely to see you. I hope you slept well?"

"Good morning." Margaret's tone was polite but her posture had gone rigid. "Yes, quite well, thank you."

Alastor's attention returned to Vox, his pleasantness not quite masking what looked like irritation. "The gentlemen we were speaking with earlier wanted to continue their conversation with you. They had additional questions about television broadcasting techniques and cross-platform coordination strategies. Specific technical questions they felt you'd be well positioned to answer."

Vox blinked, genuinely confused. "Really? I thought the conversation was over. They seemed pretty engaged with you when I left."

"Well, it wasn't over." Alastor's smile had developed an edge, his eyes hardening fractionally. "They specifically asked where you'd gone, whether you'd be returning to finish the discussion. I had to explain that you'd wandered off without indicating your intentions."

"Oh." Vox shrugged, taking a sip of his coffee with deliberate casualness. "Well, if they need me they know where to find me. I'm not hard to miss. We'll probably cross paths again during the demonstrations."

He turned back to Margaret deliberately, his body language dismissing the interaction, his attention shifting away from Alastor to focus on her. "Come on, Margaret. Let's see who else is here."

He started walking, guiding Margaret with him, not looking back to see Alastor's reaction. Let him stand there, let him figure out what to do with that dismissal. Vox had done his part, had introduced Alastor to useful contacts, had gotten him into the networking circle. Now it was Alastor's problem to manage those relationships.

They found a quieter spot near the windows overlooking Hartford's downtown, the morning light streaming through the glass creating a more intimate atmosphere than the crowded main floor. Margaret leaned closer, her voice becoming more confidential, almost conspiratorial.

"Vincent, I have to say this." Her expression was conflicted, like she was sharing something she knew she probably shouldn't. "He's definitely strange."

Vox laughed, genuinely amused by her bluntness. "Why? What did he do this time?"

"I don't know!" Margaret gestured vaguely with her free hand, her exasperation evident. "He's just... Strange. Especially here, at this event. He was fine at the radio station, very professional, very charming when he needed to be. But here? There's something off about him that I can't quite put my finger on. Did you see how he looked at you? Did you have a disagreement last night?"

Vox considered this, sipping his coffee. "I don't know, I think he's actually better here. More relaxed, maybe."

"You think *that's* him being relaxed?" Margaret's eyebrows rose, her disbelief clear.

Before Vox could respond, a man approached them. Middle aged with graying hair and an eager expression that suggested he'd been working up the courage to interrupt their conversation.

"Excuse me, are you Vincent Whittman?"

Vox turned, his smile automatically engaging, his posture opening to welcome the interruption. "That's me. And you are?"

"David Cooperman, from Philadelphia radio." The man extended his hand enthusiastically, his handshake slightly too firm. "I heard you talking earlier about cross platform coordination and I'd love to pick your brain about television broadcasting techniques. We've been considering adding visual elements to some of our programs but the technical challenges seem daunting."

"I'd be happy to discuss it," Vox said warmly, genuinely interested now. "Margaret, you don't mind, do you?"

"Go ahead," Margaret said, smiling indulgently. She touched his arm briefly, a small gesture of affection. "I should probably find Barbara anyway, make sure she doesn't need help with whatever preparations she mentioned this morning."

She moved away toward the main crowd, leaving Vox with Cooperman who was already pulling out a small notebook filled with sketches and technical notes.

"So, visual elements," Vox began, already falling into the rhythm of technical discussion that came naturally. "What specifically are you considering? Live broadcasts with visual components, or are we talking about recorded segments that could incorporate imagery?"

Cooperman launched into an explanation of his station's ambitions, his enthusiasm infectious even if his technical knowledge was primitive.

They talked for maybe fifteen minutes, their discussion attracting two more men who joined them, drawn by the animated conversation about broadcast technology. Vox absorbed them into the discussion seamlessly, his energy never dwindling.

This was what he was good at. Understanding how to navigate these spaces, how to make people want to talk to him, how to extract useful information while making them feel like they were getting the better end of the exchange.

"The real breakthrough will be in signal processing," Vox was explaining, gesturing with his coffee cup for emphasis. "Right now we're limited by bandwidth constraints, but once we develop more efficient compression techniques, we could potentially transmit higher quality images without requiring proportionally larger frequency allocations. The mathematics of it are fascinating actually, there's this concept called..."

"Vincent!" Margaret appeared at his elbow again, slightly breathless. "Sorry to interrupt, but they are about to start the opening session. We should probably find seats before all the good ones are taken."

Vox glanced at the clock mounted on the wall, surprised to find thirty minutes had passed. The room had filled considerably during his conversation, now packed with symposium attendees all migrating toward the rows of seats being set up at the far end.

"It was great talking to you," Vox said, shaking hands all around. "We should continue this later, Cooperman."

"Wait, Vincent," Cooperman said, leaning in closer, his voice dropping to a confidential whisper. "I shouldn’t even be mentioning this, but there is a private suite on the tenth floor. Tomorrow morning. It is an exclusive gathering for television principals only. Executives from the major networks are flying in. No radio staff. They are looking for fresh blood, people with the kind of forward thinking vision you were just describing. It is a once in a lifetime opportunity."

Cooperman patted Vox on the shoulder with visible satisfaction. "I will find you at lunch to give you the room number. This could be the start of something massive for you, truly."

Vox nodded before letting Margaret guide him toward the seating area, his movements mechanical, his mind already racing at a hundred miles an hour.

He could not refuse that invitation. It was the ladder he had been looking for, a direct line that bypassed Sterling and the regional sludge he was currently drowning in. But as he settled into the padded chair, a cold, sharp reality pierced through the excitement.

If he went to that meeting, he would be gone for hours. Alastor was already radiating a profound sense of boredom with everything going on. The moment Vincent left, he would snoop. And he would inevitably find that kitchen knife at the bottom of Vox’s suitcase.

There was no innocent explanation for a weatherman carrying a concealed blade. The moment Alastor saw it, Vox’s entire life would be over, metaphorically and literally.

He had to get rid of it now.

Vox scanned the ballroom. The hotel was packed to the gills. Every corner held a cluster of men in suits. The hallways were patrolled by bellhops and security. Discarding a weapon inside the hotel was a fool's errand. Throwing it out a window was too risky, and carrying it out to the street would be just as conspicuous. He needed the knife gone, and he needed it to stay gone without it being traced back to him.

Margaret leaned over, her voice quiet but warm. "You were really in your element there. I've never seen you quite so animated at work. It's nice, seeing you genuinely excited about something."

"Technical stuff is interesting when people actually want to learn rather than just checking boxes," Vox said, taking a sip of his lukewarm coffee. "Plus these guys are experimenting with new things rather than just maintaining status quo. Makes the conversation more engaging."

Margaret was quiet for a moment, before speaking up. "Where's Barbara, by the way? I figured she'd be attached to Alastor's hip for the whole symposium, taking notes and coordinating his schedule."

"What do you mean?" Vox frowned, scanning the room. "She was with your group earlier when I found you."

"She left," Margaret said, her tone carrying mild annoyance mixed with confusion. "Right before you came over, actually. Said she had something urgent to handle. She's been disappearing all morning. Left early before I even woke up, barely saw her at breakfast, keeps vanishing from conversations without explanation."

Interesting. Was Alastor deliberately keeping Barbara away from Vox? Isolating her so there were fewer witnesses to their interactions, fewer opportunities for her to observe how they actually related to each other? Or...

"Speaking of last night," Margaret continued, her expression curious. "Why didn't you two come to the evening mixer? I waited around for a while thinking you might show up eventually, but Barbara said you weren't coming. She seemed pretty definitive about it. Did you or Alastor tell her you wouldn't be attending?"

Vox felt his brain scramble for explanation, his thoughts racing through possible lies that would sound plausible. "I was exhausted from the trip. Fell asleep pretty much immediately after unpacking, didn't even make it through dinner. And Alastor didn't want to go either, said he needed rest for today's sessions."

The lie came smoothly, technically accurate even if the actual circumstances had been considerably more complicated than simple exhaustion. He'd been conscious for the mixer, just trapped in the room protecting his suitcase from potential discovery.

"That makes sense, I suppose." Margaret didn't seem suspicious, just accepting the explanation at face value. "Though you missed some good conversations. Several manufacturers were showing off prototypes, doing informal demonstrations. The RCA people had this fascinating new television system they were previewing."

"Like that?" Vox gestured toward a display near the side of the room that he'd noticed earlier. A small crowd had gathered around what appeared to be some kind of television setup, their expressions awed, their voices carrying excited murmurs.

"Exactly like that," Margaret said, her eyes brightening with interest. "Want to look before the session starts? We've got a few minutes."

They stood, moving closer to join the group examining the equipment. It was an RCA *Color TV prototype*, the sign proclaimed in bold letters. State of the art broadcasting technology, representing the future of visual media. The next evolution in home entertainment.

Vox looked at the screen and felt his lips curl before he could stop himself.

The image quality was terrible. Grainy, low resolution, the colors bleeding into each other, making everything look muddy and indistinct. The picture kept flickering, the signal clearly unstable, the entire display barely functional by any reasonable standard. This was what they thought was revolutionary? This garbage technology that could barely produce coherent images? It would take years until it could be optimized enough to be sold to the public at large.

"Isn't it amazing?" Margaret spoke up beside him, her eyes wide with genuine wonder, completely oblivious to the technical inadequacy. "Color television. Can you imagine what this could mean for advertising? For broadcasting in general? Being able to show products in their actual colors, demonstrate features visually?"

"Yes." Vox forced enthusiasm into his voice, pushing down the contempt that wanted to escape. "It's really something. Definitely the future of the medium."

Margaret didn't notice anything amiss about his reply, still beaming, clearly thrilled by the technology and by sharing this moment with him.

But Vox's real attention had shifted to movement across the room. Robert was standing near the bar setup, nursing a drink that was definitely not coffee based on the amber color visible through the glass. His eyes were fixed on Vox with an expression of concentrated suspicion, his posture tense, his jaw working slightly like he was grinding his teeth.

Robert had been watching them this entire time. Had observed Vox's networking, his confident handling of the industry professionals, his easy command of Margaret's attention and affection. Had cataloged every interaction, every smile, every gesture. And now he was watching Vox's reaction to the television display.

Vox met Robert's eyes across the room deliberately, his expression shifting to something pleasant and unbothered. A small smile, a slight nod of acknowledgment, nothing more. Just two professionals at the same industry event, no tension, no history.

Robert didn't return the gesture. Just continued staring, his drink raised halfway to his mouth and forgotten there, his entire attention locked on Vox with an intensity that bordered on obsessive.

"We should get back to our seats," Margaret said, tugging gently on Vox's arm. "They're starting to dim the lights for the presentation."

Vox let her pull him away, back toward their seats in the middle section. The room was settling now, conversations dying down as people found their places, attention shifting toward the podium where a man in a gray suit was preparing to speak.

As Vox settled into his chair, his eyes found Alastor several rows ahead. He was sitting beside Barbara who had materialized from her preparations. They looked professional and coordinated, the radio station's key staff properly positioned for maximum networking impact. Alastor's posture was relaxed but alert, his attention on the speaker taking the podium.

The opening session speaker launched into welcome remarks about the symposium's purpose and the exciting developments in broadcast technology. It was standard opening material, designed to set a tone without saying anything particularly useful.

Vox didn't hear a word of it. He stared at the back of Alastor’s head, lost in his steadily spiralling thoughts about weapon disposal techniques.

Suddenly, a lightbulb flickered to life in the back of Vox’s mind, his eyes widening slightly as a plan, elegant and vicious, assembled itself with surprising clarity.

Vox leaned back in the chair, pretending to watch the grainy technical diagrams flashing on the screen, a slow, predatory smile spreading across his face. The static under his skin felt warmer now, no longer a nervous buzz.

He couldn't believe just how smart he could be sometimes.

Chapter 59

The opening session finally concluded with polite applause, the speaker wrapping up his presentation about frequency modulation advances with technical jargon that sounded impressive but communicated very little of practical value. Vox stood along with the rest of the attendees, his body protesting the movement after sitting still for so long, his back still aching from the night on the floor.

Margaret gathered her notes, tucking them into her leather folio. Her handwriting had covered several pages during the presentation, neat rows of shorthand that probably extracted more value from the generic content than most people had managed.

"I'm starving," Margaret said, standing and smoothing her skirt. "Want to grab lunch? There's supposed to be a nice restaurant in the hotel, or we could venture outside if you want to explore Hartford a bit."

Vox considered the options, his mind still buzzing with the plan that had crystallized during the presentation. The knife needed to disappear, and his solution required staying close to the symposium crowd, maintaining visibility, creating the right circumstances for what needed to happen next.

"Let's stay here," he said, his tone casual. "I'd like to keep mingling a bit, make sure I'm not missing any important conversations. Plus we're here for networking, might as well take advantage of every opportunity."

Margaret's expression brightened, clearly pleased that he was taking the professional development aspect seriously. "That's smart thinking. And honestly, the food here is supposed to be excellent. Barbara was raving about the breakfast service this morning before she disappeared again."

They moved with the flow of people exiting the ballroom, the crowd breaking into smaller groups as attendees headed toward various destinations. Some were clearly heading for the

restaurant, others gathering near the demonstration areas that had been set up in adjacent rooms, a few heading toward the elevators presumably to rest before the afternoon sessions.

The hotel restaurant was located off the main lobby, its entrance marked by brass fixtures and a small placard announcing today's specials in elegant script. The interior was dimly lit despite being midday, the windows covered with heavy drapes that created an intimate atmosphere. Tables were arranged with enough space between them to allow for private conversation, white tablecloths and proper place settings suggesting this was meant to be upscale dining rather than quick casual meals.

A hostess greeted them at the entrance, her smile professional and welcoming. "Just the two of you?"

"Yes please," Margaret said before Vox could respond.

They were led to a table near the back, away from the main traffic flow but still positioned where they could observe other diners. Vox scanned the room as they walked, cataloging faces, noting which symposium attendees had chosen to eat here versus seeking food elsewhere.

He pulled out Margaret's chair before sitting across from her, the gesture automatic. Margaret smiled at the courtesy, settling into her seat with visible satisfaction.

The hostess handed them menus, leather bound and surprisingly extensive for a hotel restaurant. "Your server will be with you shortly. Enjoy your meal."

Vox opened the menu, scanning the options without really processing them. His attention was divided, part of him maintaining the performance while the larger part strategized about weapon disposal and all the moving pieces that needed to align perfectly for this to work.

"The salmon looks good," Margaret said, studying her menu with genuine interest. "Or maybe the chicken. I can never decide at places like this, everything sounds delicious."

"Margaret?"

The voice came from directly beside their table, drawn out and slightly slurred. Vox looked up to find Robert Carmichael standing there, his posture less steady than it had been this morning, his eyes slightly unfocused, like he'd been drinking through lunch rather than eating.

"What are you doing here?" Robert's attention was fixed on Margaret, his question directed at her despite Vox being the one who'd made eye contact first.

Margaret's expression shifted, something strange crossing her features. Not quite discomfort, but close to it. A flash of something that might have been guilt or embarrassment or resignation, too quick to identify with certainty. She looked at Vox, her eyes carrying a question she didn't voice.

A cog in Vox's brain was starting to turn. He was starting to realize something, the pieces assembling themselves from observations he'd filed away without conscious thought. The way Robert had watched them at the Holloway dinner. The pointed questions about Vox's background from Robert's family. The bitter edge to every interaction. The way Robert was looking at Margaret right now.

"We're getting something to eat," Vox said, his tone friendly despite the growing understanding. "Just finished the morning session, figured we'd grab lunch before the evening demonstrations."

Robert was still looking at Margaret, as if expecting an answer from her instead, as if Vox's response didn't count because he wasn't the person Robert actually cared about hearing from. "Can I join you? I'm starved. Haven't eaten since breakfast."

His words were directed at the table in general but his eyes never left Margaret's face, waiting for her permission or rejection or whatever signal he thought he deserved from her.

Margaret laughed awkwardly, the sound forced and uncomfortable. She shrugged, a small gesture that could mean anything or nothing, her expression asking Vox to handle this

situation she clearly didn't want to navigate herself.

Vox took it as an agreement, his smile widening with fake enthusiasm. "Of course! The more the merrier. Pull up a chair."

He gestured to the empty seat beside him, forcing Robert to sit next to him rather than beside Margaret, a small territorial claim that Robert clearly noticed based on the tightness around his eyes. But Robert sat anyway, signaling the server for a menu with the casual entitlement of someone used to being accommodated.

The server arrived moments later, a young woman with practiced professionalism who took their orders. Margaret chose the salmon, Vox ordered the chicken without really caring what he ate, and Robert requested a steak cooked rare along with another whiskey that the server noted with visible concern given it was barely past noon.

The conversation that followed was stilted and awkward, Robert making multiple attempts to engage Margaret in discussion about mutual acquaintances from their social circle, people Vox had never met and had no context for understanding. Margaret responded with polite but minimal answers, clearly trying to include Vox in the conversation but finding it difficult when Robert kept steering toward shared history.

"And do you remember that summer at the lake house?" Robert asked, his attention fixed on Margaret with intensity that made Vox's skin prickle. "When your family and mine spent two weeks there, and we'd take the boat out every afternoon?"

"That was years ago, Robert," Margaret said, her tone carrying gentle dismissal. "I barely remember most of it."

"I remember," Robert insisted, his voice getting louder. "Your mother made that comment about how we looked good together in the boat."

The implication was clear enough that even Margaret couldn't deflect it politely. Her face flushed slightly, her hands fidgeting with her napkin. "Robert, that's not really appropriate conversation for..."

"Why not?" Robert's attention finally shifted to Vox, his eyes hard despite the alcohol. "We're all friends here, right? Just sharing old memories. No harm in that."

Vox met his gaze steadily, his expression pleasant but his mind cataloging every piece of information Robert was providing through his increasingly transparent jealousy. This was better than he'd ever hoped.

The food arrived before the tension could escalate further. They ate in relative silence, the awkwardness settling over the table like a heavy blanket. Robert kept drinking, his whiskey disappearing faster than his food, his movements becoming less coordinated as the meal progressed. Margaret finished her salmon quickly, her appetite apparently diminished by Robert's presence, her eyes constantly checking the room like she was looking for escape routes.

"I should go," Margaret said finally, setting down her fork with visible relief. "I told Barbara I'd help her with some coordination for tomorrow's sessions. Thank you for lunch, Vincent."

She stood, leaning down to kiss Vox's cheek, her hand squeezing his shoulder. Then she was gone, moving toward the exit, leaving Vox alone with Robert.

Robert watched her go, his expression cycling through longing and bitterness and something darker that Vox couldn't quite identify. Then his attention returned to Vox, his jaw tight, his hands clenching around his whiskey glass hard enough to make his knuckles white.

"She's something, isn't she?" Vox said, keeping his tone light and conversational. "Really special. I'm lucky to have found someone like her."

The words were designed to provoke, to dig into whatever wound Robert was nursing, to make this personal so it could serve Vox's purposes later.

Robert's eyes narrowed, his mouth pressing into a thin line. "You don't deserve her."

"Maybe not," Vox agreed easily, leaning back in his chair with casual confidence. "But she seems to like me anyway. Can't really control who people are attracted to, can you? Chemistry is weird like that."

"Chemistry," Robert repeated, the word dripping with contempt. "Is that what you call it? Smooth talking your way into her life, playing the ambitious young professional, making her think you're going places when really you're just a nobody weatherman from nowhere?"

Vox felt his smile widen despite the insult, or maybe because of it. Robert was breaking down, the alcohol and jealousy stripping away whatever professional courtesy he'd been maintaining earlier. This was exactly what Vox needed, the raw emotions that would make Robert easy to manipulate.

"Where are you from anyway?" Robert continued, not waiting for response to his previous question. "You mentioned something about your family during the dinner but it was all vague. Just generic nonsense about humble beginnings."

"My family wasn't wealthy," Vox said, the lie coming smoothly as he constructed a background that would maximize Robert's resentment. "My father worked in a factory, my mother took in laundry to make ends meet. We lived in a small apartment, ten of us in one room. Money was always tight, opportunities were limited."

He paused, watching Robert's expression darken with each detail. "But I worked hard. Studied, applied myself, took every chance that came my way. Made something of myself despite starting from nothing. It's possible, you know, with enough determination."

The implication was clear. Vincent had started from zero and still surpassed him.

Robert's face flushed darker, anger mixing with humiliation. "My family has connections," he said, his voice rising slightly. "Real connections, not just climbing the ladder at some regional station. The Carmichaels have been in broadcasting for three generations. We practically built the industry in this region."

"That must be nice," Vox said, his tone sympathetic. "Having family support like that. Must make things easier."

"It doesn't make things easier," Robert snapped, his control slipping further. "It makes things harder. Everyone expects you to succeed automatically, to just slide into positions because of your name. But when you don't, when things get difficult, they judge you twice as hard. Say you're wasting opportunities and failing to live up to legacy."

He finished his whiskey in one swallow, slamming the glass down on the table hard enough to make nearby diners turn and stare. "And then someone like you comes along and suddenly you're the one getting opportunities, getting recognition, getting the girl..."

He stopped himself, his jaw clenching, but the damage was done. The confession was clear enough.

Vox leaned forward slightly, his expression shifting to something more sympathetic, more understanding. "The girl who was supposed to be yours?"

Robert looked away, his hands clenching into fists on the table. "Her family and mine had an understanding. Not official, but everyone knew. We grew up together, spent summers at the same clubs, attended the same parties. It was supposed to be natural. The right match between the right families."

"But her parents don't approve anymore," Vox said, filling in the gaps Robert was leaving. "Because you're struggling career wise. The Carmichael legacy isn't translating into actual success for you specifically."

Robert's silence was confirmation enough.

Vox felt the plan solidifying further, the pieces falling into place. Robert was desperate and bitter, drowning in family expectations and personal failures and watching someone he viewed as beneath him succeed where he was failing. The perfect target for manipulation, too emotional to think clearly, too invested in the outcome to question convenient opportunities for revenge.

"I should go," Vox said, standing and pulling out his wallet to cover the meal. "Need to freshen up before the afternoon sessions. But this was good, Robert. We should talk more later."

The words were delivered with friendliness that would sting more than hostility. Vox dropped bills on the table, more than enough to cover everyone's meals and tip, another small demonstration of his financial stability compared to Robert's clearly struggling circumstances.

Robert stared at the money, his expression cycling through shame and anger. "Yeah. Sure. Later."

Vox left him sitting there, nursing his empty whiskey glass, radiating bitterness like heat from a furnace.

The walk back to his room was longer than Vox remembered, or maybe it just felt longer because his mind was racing ahead, running through scenarios and contingencies and all the ways this could go wrong if he miscalculated even slightly. The hallway carpet muffled his footsteps, the walls closing in with their faded floral wallpaper, the lighting dim enough to make everything feel slightly surreal.

He needed to plant more seeds with Robert. Needed to make him so angry, so desperate, so convinced that Vox was a threat that needed to be exposed, that Robert would act without thinking. The evening event would provide opportunities. Alcohol would lower inhibitions further. The right words, delivered at the right moment, would push Robert over the edge into doing exactly what Vox needed him to do.

Break into the room, find the knife and get caught with it.

It was elegant in its simplicity. Robert was already primed for it, seeing Vox as someone dangerous and fake and undeserving. Just needed a little more pressure and Robert would do the rest himself.

As he walked, his internal monologue began to spiral. He could see the newsreels playing in his mind, the footage of himself being interviewed on the hotel steps. He would be the hero of Hartford. People would flock to him, eager to shake the hand of the brave young man who had risked his life to disarm a drunken, knife wielding madman. Margaret would be so overcome with gratitude that she would probably double her efforts to get him promoted.

Every television executive in the building would want a piece of the man who showed more physical courage than the entire radio station combined. He could see the headlines now, printed in bold, blocky letters: Local Newsman Disarms Assassin.

Perhaps they would even give him a key to the city. He imagined himself standing on a stage, the lights hot and bright, while important men in expensive suits applauded his poise and physical courage. He would win. The world was just a stage, and he was the only one who had actually read the script.

"What's got you so happy, Vincent?"

Vox was so lost in his thoughts, that he didn't register he had pushed through the door to the room. His head snapped up, eyes focusing on Alastor who was sitting in the chair near the window, a book open in his lap but his attention clearly on Vox rather than the pages. His expression was mild but his eyes were tracking Vox's face, missing nothing.

"Huh?" Vox blinked, his brain scrambling to shift gears from internal strategizing to external performance. "What?"

"You seem to be in a remarkably good mood," Alastor said, his tone conversational. "Practically glowing with satisfaction about something. I'm curious what could have produced such a dramatic shift from this morning's general irritability."

Vox forced his expression to relax, to shift away from whatever predatory satisfaction had been showing through. "I just grabbed lunch with Margaret. It was nice, that's all. Good food, pleasant conversation."

"Ah." Alastor's smile widened fractionally. "That explains it. Quality time with your beloved. How romantic."

The words should have sounded sincere but came out slightly mocking instead, like Alastor found the entire concept of their romance faintly ridiculous. He closed his book with a soft sound, setting it aside on the small table. "Well, I'm afraid I need to leave shortly. There's a planning meeting for tomorrow's technical demonstrations. The organizing committee wants input from key presenters about scheduling and equipment setup."

"You're presenting tomorrow?" Vox moved further into the room, setting his jacket on the bed.

"A brief demonstration," Alastor confirmed, standing and smoothing his own jacket. "Nothing too extensive, just showcasing some innovations we've implemented at the station. Should take maybe thirty minutes, then I can return to watching you attempt to impress everyone."

He moved toward the door, pausing with his hand on the knob. "I'll be gone for at least an hour, possibly two depending on how tedious the committee makes the planning process. Try not to destroy the room while I'm away."

Then he was gone, the door clicking shut behind him with soft finality, leaving Vox alone with his thoughts and his suitcase and the knife that still needed handling.

Vox stood there for a moment, listening to Alastor's footsteps recede down the hallway, waiting until silence confirmed he was truly alone. Then he moved to his suitcase, his hands working the latches.

The knife was still at the bottom where he'd hidden it, wrapped in its sock cocoon, invisible to casual inspection. Vox stared at it, his mind running through calculations about risk and reward and the gamble he was about to take.

He needed to move it higher in the suitcase to make it easier for Robert to find when he inevitably came snooping. But moving it meant increasing the risk that Alastor would

discover it first if he decided to go through Vox's belongings before Robert had a chance to take the bait.

It was a gamble where either outcome would be catastrophic.

But the alternative was worse. If Robert couldn't find the knife easily, if he had to dig too deep or take too long searching, someone might interrupt before he could be properly caught with it. The plan required perfect timing to make sure Robert would be discovered in a position that looked unambiguously guilty.

Vox pulled the knife from its hiding place, unwrapping the sock slowly. The blade gleamed dully in the room's lighting, six inches of potentially damning evidence that had seemed like such a good idea when he'd packed it back home. Protection, he'd told himself. A weapon in case things went wrong with Alastor, in case the serial killer decided his contractor was a liability.

Now it was just a problem that needed solving.

He rewrapped it, but this time placed it in the middle layer of his suitcase, tucked between folded shirts where casual rummaging would reveal it without requiring extensive searching. Visible enough to be found, hidden enough to suggest it was meant to be concealed.

Vox closed the suitcase, his heart pounding harder than the action warranted. The gamble was set. Either Alastor would go through his things first and find it, or Robert would take the bait tonight and the plan would proceed as planned.

He paced the room, unable to sit still, his mind running through the plan over and over like a recording on loop. The evening event would start in a few hours. He'd need to position himself near Robert to create opportunities for private conversation while making sure that he sounded convincing enough when he "slipped up" and he started saying things he shouldn't. Plant the seeds about "tools" and "permanent solutions" and all the vaguely threatening language that would make Robert's paranoid suspicions lead to action.

The knife was in position. The target was primed. The stage was set.

Now he just needed to execute without getting caught.

Vox repeated the plan in his head a thousand times, pacing the room like a caged animal, his thoughts spiraling through every possible outcome until the scenarios blurred together into noise.

Chapter 60

Eventually the afternoon faded into evening, the light through the window shifting from bright to dim to the artificial glow of Hartford's streetlights coming on below. Vox showered, changed into fresh clothes, made himself presentable for the evening networking event that would serve as the final stage for his trap.

The event was held in the same ballroom as the morning session, but the space had been transformed. The chairs were gone, replaced by small tables scattered throughout, a bar set up along one wall, soft music playing from speakers mounted in corners. The lighting was dimmer, more intimate, designed to encourage casual conversation rather than formal presentations.

Vox arrived early, scanning the room as people filtered in. Margaret appeared within minutes, looking refreshed and happy, her earlier discomfort from lunch apparently forgotten. Barbara materialized shortly after, attaching herself to Alastor who'd arrived from some other direction looking vaguely bored with the entire proceeding.

Robert arrived looking worse than he had at lunch, his tie loosened, his face flushed, his movements suggesting he'd continued drinking through the afternoon rather than sobering up.

Vox positioned himself near the bar, nursing a drink that was mostly ice with minimal alcohol, pretending like he was sipping on it while keeping his faculties sharp. Margaret joined him, her hand finding his arm with comfortable familiarity, her smile warm as she greeted various acquaintances passing by.

The evening proceeded in a blur of small talk, people moving between groups with the practiced ease of professionals who did this kind of thing regularly. Vox kept track of Robert through peripheral vision, watching him orbit Margaret's position with increasing obviousness, his jealousy becoming more visible as the alcohol loosened his control.

Alastor remained near Barbara for most of the evening, his expression carrying polite disinterest in the proceedings, occasionally engaging when someone approached him but

otherwise seeming content to observe rather than participate.

Vox kept checking his watch, counting down to when he'd need to make his move. The nervous energy coursed through him, his body buzzing with anticipation and fear and the electric awareness that everything hinged on the next few hours.

Margaret noticed immediately, her expression shifting to concern. "Are you alright? You seem anxious."

"Just tired," Vox lied smoothly. "Long day of presentations and networking. I'm not used to this much social interaction compressed into such a short time."

She squeezed his arm sympathetically, clearly buying the explanation. "We can leave early if you want. I know these events can be exhausting."

"No, no, I'm fine," Vox assured her. "Just need to pace myself with the drinks."

He took another sip of his mostly-ice cocktail, his attention tracking Margaret as she excused herself to talk to Barbara across the room. Alastor was momentarily distracted by a passing colleague, someone from another station asking about his presentation tomorrow.

The opportunity had arrived.

Vox moved toward Robert with deliberate casualness, sliding into the space beside him at the bar. Robert looked up, his eyes unfocused, his expression cycling through recognition and immediate hostility.

"Robert," Vox said, his voice pitched low enough that only Robert could hear over the ambient noise. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Robert's jaw tightened but he nodded, clearly too drunk to effectively refuse.

Vox leaned closer, letting his posture sag, as if he was overcome with intoxication he didn't actually feel, his words slightly slurred. "It's about the conversation we had earlier. I need to tell you something. About my situation."

He paused, watching Robert's attention sharpen despite the alcohol, jealousy and suspicion warring across his features.

"You know, she's lovely," Vox continued, his tone shifting to something more confessional, lot more honest sounding. "Really lovely. But she's a bit much sometimes, you know? Clinging to me like that, always wanting attention, always needing reassurance. It gets exhausting."

Robert's expression darkened, his hands clenching into fists. "Then why are you with her?"

"Because she's useful," Vox said, the words delivered with cold calculation masked as drunken honesty. "People are like broadcasts, Robert. You understand that, being in the industry. Once they've served their purpose, once the ratings drop, you have to cut the feed. Move on to better opportunities."

He took another sip of his drink, his eyes not quite focusing on Robert's face, playing the part of someone who'd had too much and was saying things they shouldn't. "I brought some specialized tools to Hartford. To make sure the transition is permanent when the time comes. Can't have loose ends, you know? Can't have people talking about things that should stay private."

Robert had gone very still, his expression cycling through confusion and growing alarm.

"The tools are tucked away well, obviously," Vox continued, his voice dropping to barely audible. "Deep down in my bag where she won't find them if she goes looking. I wouldn't want her to stumble onto them too early. Would spoil the surprise."

He straightened up, his expression becoming more cheerful. "Anyway! Good talk, Robert. We should do this again sometime."

Then he turned away, moving back toward where Margaret stood talking to Barbara, leaving Robert at the bar looking stunned and horrified and exactly primed for what needed to happen next.

Vox positioned himself back with Margaret, his hand finding hers, his smile warm and affectionate. He could feel Robert's eyes on him from across the room, could practically hear the gears turning in Robert's brain as he processed what he thought he'd just heard.

An hour passed. Vox maintained his position, kept up his performance as doting boyfriend, waited for Robert to make his move.

It came with almost predictable timing.

Vox had stepped away from Margaret to order another drink, his back turned to the main crowd. His room key was in his pocket but he pulled it out deliberately, setting it on the bar as he flagged down the bartender, making it visible and accessible.

"Another whiskey," he said to the bartender, his attention seemingly focused on the drink order rather than his surroundings.

In his peripheral vision, Vox saw Robert approaching with an unsteady gait. He paused near the bar, his hand darting out with surprising speed despite the intoxication. Vox saw the room key disappear into Robert's pocket.

Vox couldn't help but smile to himself.

He completed his drink order, accepted the glass from the bartender, turned back toward the crowd as if nothing had happened. Robert was already moving toward the exit, practically

stumbling in his haste, his expression carrying the manic determination of someone convinced they were about to expose a terrible truth.

Vox waited for a moment before making his own move.

He found Alastor near the windows, standing alone, Barbara having wandered off somewhere. He looked like he was contemplating escape from this entire event, his usual pleasant mask slipping slightly to reveal genuine boredom.

"Alastor," Vox said, his voice urgent enough to cut through whatever thoughts were occupying Alastor's mind. "We have a problem."

Alastor's eyebrows rose, his expression becoming more alert. "What kind of problem?"

"I overheard rumors circulating at the symposium," Vox said, the lie flowing smoothly. "About our project. Our secret is out. Someone leaked information about what we're working on."

Alastor's expression shifted, something flickering across his features too quickly to identify. Surprise, probably. His eyes narrowed slightly, tracking Vox's face with increased attention.

"And I just saw Robert Carmichael take our room key," Vox continued, his voice dropping to something more urgent. "Margaret's family friend. He was muttering about about exposing... Something. He's going to our room right now to snoop, probably looking for documents or evidence he can use. We need to stop him before he finds anything sensitive. I can't let this get back to Sterling."

Alastor stared at him for a long moment, his expression cycling through several emotions Vox couldn't quite parse. Then, unexpectedly, something that might have been impressed satisfaction crossed his features.

"Lead the way," Alastor said, his voice carrying an edge that Vox couldn't quite identify.

They moved toward the elevators, Vox's heart pounding hard enough that he could feel it in his throat. This was it. The trap was springing. Either it would work exactly as planned or it would explode spectacularly and destroy everything.

The elevator ride to the fourth floor felt endless, neither of them speaking, tension building in the small space. Vox could see Alastor in his peripheral vision, his posture alert but not tense, his expression neutral but his eyes bright with something that looked almost like anticipation.

When they reached the room, Vox felt a sudden, sharp jolt of realization that made his heart skip a beat. He did not have the key. He had deliberately left it on the bar table for Robert to swipe. He opened his mouth to say something, but Alastor did not give him the chance to speak. He stepped forward with an expression of profound irritation and gripped the brass handle.

The door swung open.

The room had been tossed. Robert had clearly torn through everything, suitcases were open, clothes scattered, dresser drawers pulled out. He stood in the center of the destruction, the kitchen knife clutched in his hand, his expression one of triumph and rage and something approaching vindication.

"You!" Vox said, his voice pitching up with manufactured shock. "What are you doing in our room?!"

Robert's attention snapped to them, his eyes wild, his grip tightening on the knife. "You fucking psycho, I knew there was something wrong with you!"

"You're ambushing us in our room holding a kitchen knife and *I'm* the psycho?" Vox's voice rose with performed outrage. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Vox glanced sideways, checking to see if Alastor was buying this performance.

Alastor looked completely different.

His posture had transformed, his entire body tight like a guitar string wound too far, vibrating with tension that definitely wasn't fear. His eyes had gone bright and sharp, fixed on Robert and the knife with an intensity that made Vox's skin prickle.

Vox couldn't look away, a chill that had nothing to do with the drafty hotel hallway raced down his spine. This wasn't the reaction of a person faced with a knife wielding drunk but the look of a predator watching a meal present itself on a silver platter. He was so distracted by the way the man seemed to be physically leaning into the possibility of violence that he almost missed the shift in the room's energy.

Robert made a sharp move toward them, the knife raised, his face contorted with drunken rage and self righteous fury. Vox's brain scrambled to reassert control, to remember his plan about being the hero who disarmed the attacker.

But Alastor moved faster.

The speed was almost inhuman, Alastor closing the distance before Vox could process what was happening. His hand clamped around Robert's wrist, twisting with controlled force that made Robert cry out, the knife clattering to the floor.

But Robert wasn't done. Drunk and desperate and running on pure adrenaline, he threw his weight forward, using his larger size to slam Alastor against the wall.

Vox's brain ran through options rapidly. He could still be the hero. Could help subdue Robert, make it look like they'd both worked together to disarm a dangerous intruder.

He moved forward, reaching for Robert's free arm, trying to pull him away from Alastor.

The pain hit like lightning.

White hot agony tore through Vox's nervous system, the pacifist protocol activating with devastating force. Static screeched through his nerves, every muscle locking up with paralyzing pain.

He ground his teeth, screaming the same frantic lie into the void of his mind until it was the only thing he knew. *He was saving Alastor.* He had to believe it, or the angelic leash would snap tighter and leave him a convulsing heap on the carpet. The protocol didn't completely shut him down, but it made every step forward felt like he was forcing his body through a wall of jagged, invisible thorns.

Vox used it, channeling the agony into his performance, let his face contort with what looked like desperate heroic effort rather than supernatural punishment, his movements jerky and strained, as if he was fighting for his life rather than fighting against divine intervention.

In the chaos, the knife ended up back in Robert's hand somehow. Vox saw it flash in his peripheral vision, saw Robert's arm swing wild and the next thing he felt was pain across his forearm.

Vox gasped, stumbling backward, his hand going to the wound instinctively. Blood was seeping through his shirt sleeve, hot and wet, the fabric turning dark red.

"Fuck!" The word came out loud, genuine shock mixing with performance. He hadn't meant for it to get this serious. Thought it would be easier because Robert would go down fast. He could never guess this would turn into actual violence with actual consequences.

Robert was fighting like his life depended on it, his size and intoxicated rage making him dangerous despite his lack of skill.

Suddenly Vox heard voices down the hallway, footsteps running. The commotion had drawn attention, people were coming to investigate the noise.

The door burst open, several men rushing in. They saw the scene in an instant: Robert Carmichael, drunk and disheveled, holding a bloody knife in a room he'd clearly broken into, being bravely held down by the star of the evening and the well known beloved radio host, one of them bleeding from a defensive wound.

The conclusion was obvious.

"Someone call the police!" One of the men shouted, moving to help restrain Robert who was still struggling despite being outnumbered. "Get that knife away from him!"

More people crowded into the doorway, their expressions shocked, their voices overlapping as they tried to understand what was happening.

Vox let himself be pushed aside, his hand still pressed to his bleeding arm, his expression appropriately shocked. The pain was real enough that he didn't have to fake much, the cut burning like fire, his shirt sleeve completely soaked now.

Alastor had melted into the background somehow, his presence becoming less prominent as more people filled the room, his expression shifting back to something more appropriate for a victim of assault rather than someone who'd looked inappropriately excited by violence just moments before.

"Margaret it's alright!" Someone's voice carried from the hallway. "Don't worry they're fine!"

Margaret pushed through the crowd with Barbara right behind her, her face going white when she saw the blood on Vox's sleeve.

"Vincent! Oh my god, Vincent!" She rushed to him, her hands fluttering around him uncertainly, clearly wanting to help but not sure what to do. "What happened? Are you alright? Someone call an ambulance!"

"I'm fine," Vox said, his voice weak but brave, playing up the heroic angle. "Robert broke into our room. He had a knife, was ransacking our things. We tried to stop him and he attacked us. I'm fine, really, just a cut."

Margaret's arms wrapped around him, her body shaking, tears starting to stream down her face. "You could have been killed! What was he thinking? Why would he do this?"

Vox let himself lean into her embrace, his eyes finding Alastor over her shoulder. Alastor was watching him with an expression that was completely neutral, giving nothing away, his earlier excitement completely hidden behind professional concern.

Police sirens were audible now, growing louder as they approached the hotel. Hotel security was already in the room, restraining Robert who'd stopped fighting, his expression cycling through confusion and horror as his brain caught up with what had happened.

The knife lay on the floor near the overturned dresser, still bloody from where it had slashed through Vox's arm. Evidence that would be collected, cataloged, used to ensure Robert faced appropriate charges.

Vox had done it. The knife was officially gone, disposed of in a manner that was nothing short of a tactical masterpiece. Robert would be arrested, charged with breaking and entering and assault with a deadly weapon, while the evidence remained safely in police custody rather than the bottom of a suitcase. He had successfully cleared the board of a lingering nuisance, ensuring Robert’s bitter suspicions would forever be viewed as the ramblings of a drunken madman.

More importantly, the struggle had inadvertently been the ultimate test of the celestial protocol, proving he could indeed override the agony by overshadowing his malice with performative heroism. He was now the man who had saved the radio station’s most valuable asset, a hero in the eyes of Margaret and every executive currently crowding the hallway. He could feel the weight of their collective admiration, a social currency that would buy him far more than three hundred dollars a week ever could.

He glanced at Alastor, savoring the silent, heavy reality of the debt that now sat between them. He had saved the man's life, and in the polite society they both inhabited, a gift like

that was impossible to ignore without appearing ungrateful. He had walked into this room as a suspect, and he would walk out of it as a saint. He was a fucking genius.

Margaret was still clinging to him, her tears soaking into his shirt, her voice breaking as she kept repeating that he could have died, that Robert could have killed them both, that she couldn't believe this had happened.

Barbara was standing near Alastor, her expression professionally concerned, asking if he needed medical attention, if he was hurt, if there was anything she could do.

"I'm perfectly fine," Alastor said, his voice carrying that familiar theatrical warmth despite what had just happened. "Just rather shaken by the entire experience. Thank goodness Vincent had the presence of mind to fight back. Could have been considerably worse otherwise."

The praise felt strange coming from Alastor, almost mocking despite the sincere delivery.

Police arrived within minutes. They took statements from everyone, photographed the scene, collected the knife as evidence, hauled Robert away in handcuffs while he protested incoherently about tools and permanent transitions and trying to save Margaret from a killer.

The EMTs checked Vox's arm, determining it was superficial despite the dramatic bleeding, bandaging it while Margaret hovered nearby looking devastated.

"You'll need stitches," one EMT said, applying pressure to stop the bleeding. "Should go to the hospital tonight, get it properly treated. The wound isn't deep but it's long enough that it won't close properly without medical intervention."

"I'll go with him," Margaret said immediately. "I'm not letting him out of my sight after this."

The scene finally cleared after nearly an hour, police and EMTs departing, curious onlookers dispersing back to their own rooms, the hotel staff promising to clean up the destroyed room

and provide fresh accommodations if needed.

Vox sat on the bed, his bandaged arm throbbing with dull pain, Margaret still pressed against his side, Alastor sitting in the chair near the window looking completely unbothered by everything that had just transpired.

"We should go to the hospital," Margaret said again, her voice still shaky. "Get you properly treated. Alastor can come with us if you want, I'm sure he's worried about you too."

"You should go," Alastor said, his tone gentle and encouraging. "I'm perfectly fine here. Will just clean up a bit, perhaps request fresh linens from housekeeping. But Vincent needs medical attention and you should be with him for that."

Margaret stood, pulling Vox up with her, her grip on his uninjured arm gentle but insistent. "Come on. Let's get you taken care of properly."

Vox let himself be guided toward the door, his mind still buzzing with adrenaline and satisfaction despite the pain in his arm. He'd done it. The plan had worked.

He glanced back at Alastor one more time before leaving.

Alastor was smiling at him, that same strange smile from earlier, his eyes bright with something that definitely wasn't just relief at surviving an attack.

Then the door closed, and Vox was being guided down the hallway by Margaret, heading toward the hospital and stitches and the final stage of this perfectly executed trap.

Chapter 61

The hospital waiting room smelled of antiseptic, its fluorescent lighting harsh after the dim warmth of the hotel. Vox sat on an examination table while a nurse cleaned the wound on his forearm, her movements brisk and impersonal. Margaret occupied the chair beside him, still in her coat, hands folded tightly in her lap.

The cut was longer and deeper than it had felt in the chaos of the room. A clean slash running along his outer forearm, nothing that had touched anything important, but long enough that the edges kept separating whenever he moved. The nurse had already expressed her opinion about the necessity of stitches twice, each time with increasing emphasis, as if she suspected he might try to argue.

He wasn't going to argue. Stitches were fine. He'd endured considerably worse in circumstances he couldn't explain to anyone in this room.

The doctor arrived, a tired looking man in his fifties who examined the wound with a small penlight before agreeing with his nurse's assessment and setting up a tray, seemingly having done this a thousand times and expected to do it a thousand more.

"Local anesthetic first," he said, producing a needle that was impressively sized considering its intended purpose.

"That's fine." Vox kept his voice casual, watching the doctor prepare without any visible concern.

Margaret made a small sound beside him, her hands tightening in her lap until her knuckles turned white. "I can't watch this part," she announced, turning her face toward the far wall. "I'm sorry. I know it's silly. You're the one who got stabbed and you're completely calm, but needles make me feel faint."

Vox didn't look at her. A flicker of irritation crossed his features, quick and cold. Her reaction struck him as unnecessary, faintly performative, as though she believed the moment required commentary from her when it plainly did not.

"It's not silly," he said at last, forcing a note of reassurance into his voice that he didn't feel.

"You're being so brave about it." Margaret smiled at the wall, her tone soft and slightly awed. "I would be absolutely falling apart right now."

Vox straightened in his chair, not quite able to hide the flicker of satisfaction. He hadn't consciously planned for this particular reaction from her, but he appreciated the validation nonetheless. "It's not that bad," he said, watching the needle approach his skin. "Just a scratch, really."

"It is not just a scratch." Margaret's voice was firm, though she still didn't look. "That is a knife wound, Vincent. That is a very different category of injury from a scratch."

"Well." He considered this while the doctor administered the anesthetic, the sting minimal and brief. "I'm not scared of some needles and a few stitches."

"You are the calmest person I have ever met in a crisis." She turned back now that the needle was gone, her expression a mixture of admiration and exasperation. "What actually happened in that room? When you and Alastor went up and found Robert? I only heard bits and pieces from the people in the hallway. Everyone was talking over each other."

Vox let the silence stretch for a comfortable beat, the timing of a good storyteller rather than someone searching for words. "Robert had already gone through everything when we got there. The whole room tossed. He had the knife, staring at me and muttering."

"And then?"

"I pushed Alastor out of the way the second he lunged," Vox said, tone carefully restrained, as if the details were incidental. "I had Robert disarmed in seconds before he could even react."

He adjusted his sleeve, almost absently. "Robert's bigger, and the adrenaline made him stronger than he had any right to be. He managed to get the knife back in the scuffle and went for Alastor, since he's an easier target compared to me. I stepped in between them. There wasn't really another option."

He glanced at his arm, at the doctor's hands working slow and careful, and let out a small exhale, as though the memory cost him more than his expression indicated. "Didn't even feel it right away. That happens sometimes, with adrenaline. I just kept moving."

Margaret had gone very still. Her face was pale, her eyes large. "You got between Robert and a knife to protect Alastor?"

"More or less."

"Vincent." She leaned forward in her chair, closing the distance between them until her elbows rested on the examination table beside his uninjured arm. Her voice had gone quiet and serious, cutting through the ambient hospital noise. "Please. I know you're a kind person. I know you would help someone without thinking about it, and what you did was incredibly kind, but please don't put yourself in the middle of something like that. Not for someone you barely know."

Vox opened his mouth to respond and found, unexpectedly, that he didn't immediately have something ready.

He had not expected this particular direction. He had anticipated gratitude, perhaps even more of that wide-eyed admiration she usually reserved for his better weather segments. He had expected a hero's welcome, a celebratory acknowledgment of his tactical brilliance. He had not prepared for this quiet, genuinely frightened request delivered with that specific look in her eyes. It was the look of someone who had realized they could have lost something they valued, and the raw sincerity of it was suffocating.

But it was the phrasing of her plea that truly knocked the breath out of him. The words rattled around in his skull, louder than the humming fluorescent lights overhead. To Margaret, Alastor was little more than a distant radio voice, a local celebrity that Vincent had been assisting for a matter of weeks. To her, they were professional strangers who happened to share a project and a hotel room.

The sheer absurdity of his own behavior hit him then with the force of a physical blow. He saw himself as the rest of the world must see him: the man who had followed Alastor around, who had insisted on trailing him despite everything, and who had now taken a blade to the arm for a person he was supposed to find merely useful. If he were any other person looking in, he would think he was a lunatic. For a split second his confidence wavered, replaced by the terrifying awareness that everything he kept under the surface had become visible, and to any sane observer it looked like a total loss of character. He felt fundamentally off balance, as though the floor of the hospital had tilted just enough to make him realize he was standing on the edge of a very deep and very dark hole.

"I mean," he said finally, his throat suddenly dry, the words dragging slightly as he forced them out, "someone had to do something."

"Someone could have been you lying on the floor, bleeding out." Her voice was steady but strained. "That could have been so much worse. It could have been so much worse, and I would have..." She stopped, looked down at the table for a moment, then back up. "Just be careful, please. You matter to people."

Vox looked at her. At the genuine worry still visible in her face despite the crisis being over, at the way she was holding herself together through sheer good manners while clearly wanting to say considerably more than she was saying.

Something about it was inconvenient. He filed the inconvenience away carefully, somewhere it wouldn't interfere with anything practical.

"I'll be careful," he said. Then, because the moment needed something to break its weight, and because the thought had genuinely crossed his mind with real amusement, he added, "Besides, I'm trying to be a good person these days. Get past the pearly gates eventually. Can't do that if I'm letting people get stabbed around me when I could stop it."

Margaret laughed, sounding somewhat surprised by the sudden shift. "You are more devout than I realized."

Vox let out a small hum, thinking about angels in waiting rooms and celestial bureaucracy and all the divine observation that may or may not be happening at any given moment. "I guess I am."

The doctor tied off the final stitch and straightened up, peeling off his gloves. "Seven stitches. Keep it clean and dry for forty eight hours. Come back in ten days to have them removed, or see your regular physician if you're back home before then. No lifting anything heavy with that arm. No activities that would put stress on the wound."

"Thank you," Margaret said for both of them, already reaching for her coat.

"One more thing," the doctor added, fixing Vox with the look of a man who knew his instructions were about to be partially ignored. "No alcohol, either. I know you might be tempted to share a few drinks with colleagues, but the anesthetic will wear off in a few hours, and you'll want your pain tolerance intact when it does."

"Of course," Vox agreed pleasantly.

Margaret told the police what she knew standing in the hospital corridor, a brief conversation with two officers who had come to collect her statement. Her voice was steady throughout, her account of Robert's history and his fixation on her delivered without any embellishment. When one of the officers asked if she understood why Robert might have targeted her companion, she nodded with a look of profound regret.

She explained quietly that their families had been close for years, that there had once been an informal arrangement for her and Robert to marry, a social contract that her parents had unceremoniously broken once Robert's drinking and professional failures became too much for the Holloways to ignore. She outlined exactly how Robert had watched Vincent take the place he believed was his by right of birth, and how that bitterness had clearly fermented into something violent. She added, almost delicately, that her family could corroborate the history of the arrangement if necessary.

It was a perfectly coherent motive that would make any jury's decision easy.

Vox listened from a few feet away, his bandaged arm held carefully against his body, his expression one of gentle supportive concern while his internal state was considerably more self congratulatory.

It was perfect. The family could corroborate. Robert's own history corroborated. His behavior throughout the entire symposium corroborated. The drunk and desperate nobody who had always believed Margaret belonged to him by right of social class and family arrangement, who had watched a weatherman from nowhere take everything he thought was his, who had finally snapped under the combination of whiskey and wounded pride and made a catastrophically stupid decision that destroyed any remaining credibility he might have had.

It would never come back to Vox. Not a single thread led there. Robert's version of events, the story about tools and permanent solutions and deliberate confessions whispered at the bar, would be dismissed as the paranoid imaginings of a man who had been drinking since noon and had every personal reason to believe the worst about Vincent Whittman.

The officers thanked Margaret for her time. She rejoined Vox, tucking her hand through his uninjured arm, and they walked back toward the hospital entrance where a taxi was waiting.

In the cab back to the hotel, with Hartford's nighttime streets sliding past the windows and Margaret quiet beside him, Vox let himself think about more pressing matters.

"Margaret," he said, keeping his tone casual enough to mask the tiredness beneath it. "What do you think I should do about my sleeping arrangements?"

She turned from the window, her brow furrowing slightly. "What do you mean?"

"Alastor told me to find different accommodations after tonight," Vox said, allowing a note of resignation to creep into his voice. Not quite pathetic, but approaching it. "Before all of this happened. He said he needed the room to himself."

Margaret stared at him. The stare lasted several seconds as she processed this information, her expression shifting from confusion to indignation.

"He said that before you saved his life tonight," she pointed out, her voice sharpening.

"Well." Vox looked down at his bandaged arm. "Yes."

"He cannot kick you to the curb after you literally just took a knife meant for him." The outrage in her voice was immediate, the composed professional tone entirely gone. "That would be absolutely inexcusable. I don't care how particular he is about his space. That is just indecent."

"I'm not sure he'd see it quite like that."

"Then I'll come with you when you talk to him." Margaret's lips were pursed now, her jaw set. Vox recognized that expression from the hotel lobby the day before, the expression that meant she had decided something and had no intention of being argued out of it. "I'll explain that it would be completely unreasonable to expect you to go looking for a hotel room at this hour with an injured arm after what happened. I'll make him understand."

Vox considered this. On one hand, Margaret marching into his hotel room to argue on his behalf was mortifying in a way that was difficult to fully articulate. On the other hand, he needed that room.

"Let me try first," he said. "If he says no, I'll come find you."

Margaret didn't look fully satisfied but nodded. "If he says anything unreasonable, I want to know about it immediately. I mean it."

"I know you do."

She squeezed his arm gently, careful of the bandages. "You were very brave tonight," she said quietly, back to looking out the window. "Whatever you say about it."

The hotel lobby was quieter than it had been earlier. The symposium crowd had mostly dispersed to their rooms for the night, only a few people lingering near the front desk or drifting through the connecting corridors. The grandfather clock read nearly midnight, its aggressive ticking unchanged and indifferent to the evening's events.

Vox heard voices as they passed the corridor leading to the hotel bar. Low conversation, the coziness of a room with few occupants and good acoustics. He stopped, tilting his head.

He recognized one of the voices.

"There," he said, gesturing down the corridor. "Let me go. You don't have to deal with him in public after what happened tonight."

Margaret followed his gesture, her expression showing visible reluctance. "Are you sure? Because I will come in there if you need me to."

"I know. Let me try first."

She looked at him for a moment longer, then stepped back. "Come to my room if it doesn't go well. I don't care what time it is. I'll follow you to talk to him."

"You'll be asleep."

"I'll be awake," she said flatly, in a tone that suggested this was simply true and not something she was particularly happy about.

Vox nodded, leaving her at the corridor entrance as he walked toward the bar alone.

The lighting was low, amber warmth that made everything look better than it was. The bartender at the far end polished glasses slowly, as if just filling time. Near the window, a cluster of men stood in a loose circle. Their conversation had already peaked and was now declining naturally toward its conclusion. Alastor was at the center of it, still in his evening clothes, a half finished drink on the table beside him, his posture relaxed. Vox could tell had been entertaining people for hours, but still had enough left in reserve to finish gracefully.

Vox approached, his bandaged arm held slightly away from his body, mostly for show rather than any real pain.

One of the men, broad shouldered and red faced, looking like he had been drinking since well before the evening event had officially started, was finishing what was clearly the third or fourth telling of a story about some equipment failure at his station. It had presumably been funnier the first time. He punctuated the punchline by reaching out and slapping Alastor on the shoulder with the flat of his hand, hard enough that the sound carried across the quiet room with a crack that made the bartender look up.

Alastor didn't flinch. His expression remained exactly as warm and engaged as it had been. But his spine straightened by a fraction, his shoulders drawing in with a tension that lasted maybe half a second, the skin at the corners of his eyes tightening. It was there and then it wasn't, smoothed back under the surface before anyone paying normal attention would have registered it at all.

Vox registered it.

The group was already breaking up by the time he reached the table, jackets being gathered, final comments being exchanged. The broad shouldered man noticed Vox's approach, looked at his bandaged arm, and produced an impressed sound.

"Hell of an evening," the man said, clapping Vox on the back with the same heavy hand he'd used on Alastor. "You doing alright, son?"

"Seven stitches," Vox said, letting out a stiff, self deprecating laugh. "I'll survive."

The man huffed, patting his shoulder more carefully this time, then said something else about what a wild business it all was before he was gone, the others filtering out with him, the door swinging shut behind the last of them.

The quiet that settled in their wake was substantial and pleasant.

Alastor looked up. His eyes moved to Vox's arm first, tracking the bandaging visible below the rolled up cuff, and something in his expression shifted. Not toward concern exactly, but toward something more attentive.

"You should be resting," he said.

"Probably," Vox agreed, dropping into the empty chair across from him. "Who was that? The one who keeps trying to break people's shoulders."

"Gerald Marsh," Alastor said, picking up his drink. "Twenty years in broadcasting, and apparently determined that everyone he meets should feel the full weight of that experience."

"Someone should mention to him that handshakes exist," Vox said, shaking his head in mock disappointment. "A perfectly good social action, completely underutilized in his particular case."

Alastor said nothing, but his smile changed slightly in the way Vox had come to understand was his version of finding something genuinely amusing. He took a slow sip of his drink and looked out toward the window, and that was that. Except that his posture was marginally more relaxed than it had been thirty seconds earlier.

Vox looked at the door Gerald Marsh had exited through and decided that was sufficient reward.

Chapter 62

The bartender appeared without being summoned. Vox ordered two of whatever Alastor was having, recalled the doctor's instructions about anesthetic and alcohol as a vague advisory rather than a binding prohibition, and turned back to the table.

"How was it?" Alastor asked. "The hospital."

"Fine," Vox said. "They were very quick, which I appreciated. I don't have a lot of patience for waiting rooms under ideal circumstances and these were not ideal circumstances." He rolled back his cuff further, extending his arm along the bar counter so the bandaging was visible in the low ambient light. The stitching was visible at the edge where the gauze didn't quite cover, neat black thread crossing pale skin in a row. "Seven stitches. Doctor seemed almost proud of it, which I thought was a bit much."

Alastor leaned forward slightly, his eyes moving over the bandaging with what looked like genuine interest. He was quiet for a moment, examining it with the detached curiosity of someone evaluating workmanship rather than a person's injury. Then his mouth curved into a small smile. "Looks awful," he said.

"That's more or less exactly what I told him," Vox said, "and he did not appreciate it."

The drinks arrived. Vox picked his up, turned to face Alastor properly, and lifted the glass. "To surviving the first day."

Alastor picked up his glass. He was, Vox could tell now that he was sitting across from him in proper lighting without thirty other people demanding pieces of his attention, getting a bit tipsy. Not conspicuously so, not in any way he'd acknowledge if asked, but the drinks had been doing their quiet work while Gerald Marsh was telling his story.

"We sure did," Alastor said, and touched his glass to Vox's.

Vox leaned back in his chair, his bandaged arm resting on the counter, the ice in his glass shifting as he set it down. The bar was quiet enough that small sounds carried, the bartender's cloth moving along the counter, something settling in the building's infrastructure. Hartford was mostly dark beyond the windows, a few streetlights casting yellow circles on wet pavement.

"Tell me something," Vox said, his voice now low and casual. He leaned forward, just enough to catch the light in Alastor's eyes "You mentioned on the train that you took several transfers to get to your current station. Where were you before that?"

Alastor looked at him over the rim of his glass, his expression unreadable in the dim light. "The South."

Vox swirled his drink, watching the amber liquid catch a glint of the back bar lamps. "That covers quite a lot of territory. Where in the South specifically?"

"Around," Alastor replied. He said it with a bright, easy smile, using the tone of a man who had provided a full explanation and found the matter entirely settled.

Vox waited for him to elaborate, but no further details came. The only sound was the distant roar of a car passing on the street outside. "That is a remarkably large region to claim as a home," Vox noted.

"It is," Alastor agreed, looking perfectly content with his own brevity.

Vox tilted his head, watching the way the shadows played across the other man's face. "Louisiana, then?" he tried, tossing the name out like bait.

Alastor’s smile sharpened just a fraction at the edges. "Among other places."

"What did you do there? Before radio."

"Various things," Alastor said, with the same pleasant finality he'd used on the previous question. He turned his glass between his fingers, that small habitual rotation. "I kept myself occupied."

Vox let out a short, dry laugh. "That is even less of an answer than the last one."

"I thought it was quite efficient," Alastor said. He finally looked over at Vox, his expression masked by a professional level of charm. "I find that specificity in these conversations tends to invite a great deal of follow up, and I'm not sure either of us has the energy for that tonight."

Vox shifted his weight, ignoring the dull throb in his bandaged arm. "I have energy."

"You have seven fresh stitches and a strong drink," Alastor countered. He didn't blink as he took another sip. "That is a very different thing from having energy."

Vox looked at the melted ice in his own glass for a moment before trying a different angle. "Family still in the South? Anyone you go back to visit?"

Alastor went quiet. It was a real pause, one that lacked his usual performative flair. He looked down at the amber liquid in his glass and for a second the light in his eyes seemed to dim. "No."

Vox inclined his head slightly. "I see."

Alastor hummed a low, neutral note, turning his glass again.

Vox waited. He let the silence sit between them. Usually, people filled silences about dead parents. They added a scrap of context or a soft memory, providing a foothold for you to delve further into their history.

Alastor did not fill it. He sat entirely comfortable in the void. After a moment he looked up and his expression had resettled into something pleasant and opaque.

"No siblings?" Vox tried, probing the last remaining branch of a family tree that seemed increasingly like a dead end.

"No."

"So you were on your own, after."

"I managed," Alastor said, which was not a confirmation or a denial and not anything Vox could actually use.

Alastor tilted his head then, the subtle shift that meant he was redirecting. "You've been asking a great number of questions about my history," he said, his voice regaining its performative quality. "I'm curious what prompted the biographical interest. We've known each other for some months now and you haven't seemed particularly concerned with my origins until this evening."

Vox took a slow sip of his drink, letting the liquid burn on his tongue before he responded. "We have never been alone in a bar before," he noted, meeting Alastor’s unblinking gaze. "Context changes the nature of a conversation. Different environments invite different questions."

"Does it," Alastor said, not quite a question.

"You're a different person without an audience," Vox said, leaning his weight onto his good arm. He was careful not to specify just how deep his knowledge went. "Most people are. I find the difference interesting."

Alastor looked at him for a long beat with an expression that was genuinely difficult to read. There was something calculating moving just underneath the surface of his professional smile. "Most people," he finally said, his voice dropping into a softer register, "don't notice the difference."

"I notice most things," Vox replied. He met the other man’s gaze steadily, stating it as a simple fact of his nature.

"Yes," Alastor said. He spoke almost to himself, as if he were confirming a suspicion he had held for quite some time. "I have noticed that about you."

A beat of quiet settled between them. It was not uncomfortable, but it felt thick with the weight of two people watching each other from behind their respective walls.

Then Alastor set down his drink. "And yours?" he said. "Your life. You were apparently sharing it in considerable detail with Robert at lunch today. I wasn't close enough to hear everything, but I watched the conversation from across the room and Robert's face was exceptionally expressive. Whatever you were telling him was producing some very interesting reactions."

Vox had told this particular story so many times now that it now came to him naturally. "Not much to tell," he said, leaning back slightly. "My father worked in a factory. We didn't have a lot growing up. I figured out early that the only way to change your circumstances was to make yourself indispensable to people who could open doors."

"What kind of factory?" Alastor asked suddenly.

"Steel," Vox said. It was the first thing that came to mind, which he immediately recognized as the problem with drinking while constructing a false biography. The things that came to mind first were not always the things that held up under examination.

"Where?"

"Pennsylvania," Vox said. "Small town, you wouldn't know it."

Alastor nodded slowly, his expression thoughtful. Vox was beginning to realize he was doing something with the information rather than simply receiving it. "And your mother," he said. "She took in laundry?"

"That's right."

"Difficult work," Alastor noted. "Physically demanding, and the economics of it were never particularly favorable. The competition from commercial laundries was significant even in smaller markets by that period."

"She managed," Vox said. He took a certain grim pleasure in using Alastor's own favorite deflection back at him.

"I'm sure she did." Alastor picked up his drink. "Ten people in a small one room apartment, you said? That would have been quite cramped."

Vox looked at him, his glass stopping halfway to his lips. He narrowed his eyes, catching the inconsistency immediately. "How did you hear that? You just said you weren't close enough to hear the conversation."

"I said I was not close enough to hear with absolute clarity," Alastor replied, his expression shifting into one of quiet amusement. "I did not say that I heard nothing at all. The dining room was not especially loud during the lunch service and certain phrases have a way of carrying across the room."

"Right," Vox said slowly. He turned the glass in his hand, feeling the chill of the condensation. He was beginning to realize just how much of a mistake it was to fabricate a childhood under the scrutiny of a man who treated casual conversation like a high stakes card game.

"One room for ten people," Alastor continued, his voice taking on the pleasant conversational tone of someone pursuing a topic they found genuinely interesting. "How many siblings did you have, exactly?"

"Nine," Vox said. He did the math in his head as he spoke. Ten people, presumably two parents, which left eight children... no, ten total in the room, so...

"Were they older or younger than you?"

"Some older, some younger," Vox said, leaning into the vague middle ground where lies were harder to catch. "I am right in the middle."

"How interesting," Alastor said. He spoke with the same clinical curiosity he might use if he had found an unusual insect pinned to a board. "You do not carry yourself like a middle child, Vincent."

Vox looked at him, his brow furrowing. "What exactly does a middle child carry themselves like?"

"It varies from person to person," Alastor noted, setting his glass with a clink. "But there is usually a particular quality to them. They have a certain relationship to the experience of being overlooked. A learned facility for finding ways to be noticed without appearing to need to be noticed. You do not have that quality. You have the exact opposite, actually."

Vox considered whether he should take offense at the statement. He looked at Alastor’s unblinking eyes and decided the observation was accurate enough that taking offense would be a form of confession. He was not a person who liked being overlooked, and he was certainly not a person who was subtle about seeking attention.

"Maybe I just got over it," he said, taking a final swallow of his drink. "Grew out of the habit of being the quiet one."

"Maybe," Alastor said, using a tone that communicated he found this explanation adequate but not entirely satisfying. "You mentioned your father died young. How old were you when it happened?"

"Sixteen," Vox replied, sticking to the number he had given Margaret's parents. At least he *thought* that was the number.

"And after that, you supported the family?"

"I helped," Vox said, swirling the diluted remains of his drink. "My mother managed most of it."

"With the laundry."

"Yes."

"In Pittsburgh."

"Outside Pittsburgh," Vox corrected, trying to maintain a grip on the boundaries of his fiction.

"Right." Alastor turned his glass again, performing that small, habitual rotation while his expression remained thoughtfully distant. "You mentioned earlier in the evening, when you were talking to someone about how you got into broadcasting, that you decided young you were going to go into media. You said that it came to you clearly and early. When was that exactly?"

Vox had said this, he was fairly certain, sometime in the first hour of the evening. It had likely been before Robert had stolen the room key, back when Vox had been working the crowd with the effortless momentum of someone who had been doing it for decades. He remembered the conversation, but not the specific details he had offered to the other person. This was the fundamental problem with lying at scale. Eventually, the various versions required constant, grueling maintenance to keep from overlapping.

"Around twelve or thirteen," he said. "That was when we finally got our first radio."

Alastor looked at him with an expression that Vox found increasingly difficult to interpret. "You had a radio," he noted. "In a single room apartment shared by ten people, located in a small town tucked away outside Pittsburgh."

"My mother saved for it," Vox insisted. "She was careful with every penny she earned. It took a long time, but she was determined that her children would have a connection to the world."

"Of course." Alastor's expression was entirely neutral, a state that Vox was starting to realize was far more alarming than any visible emotion. "And this radio. What station did you listen to primarily? What voice did you hear that made you think, yes, this is what I want to do."

Vox named a station, some call letters that sounded appropriate for the region and the time. He saw a subtle shift in Alastor's attention, a sharp and momentary spark that indicated the answer had produced a reaction Alastor was choosing not to show directly.

"That station," Alastor said, using the measured tone of a man presenting an interesting piece of trivia, "was broadcast on AM. The geography outside Pittsburgh in those years was famously problematic for AM reception. The hills create massive interference patterns that make a reliable signal almost impossible once you leave the city limits. You would have experienced a constant, heavy static in any small town in that region."

"We moved it around a lot," Vox replied immediately. "We spent half our nights repositioning that box until we found a good spot near the window."

Alastor's gaze didn't waver. "Near which window?"

Vox looked at him. Alastor looked back, his expression one of complete and patient interest. It was the expression of a man with nowhere to be and nothing to do except follow a thread he had found.

"The bedroom window," Vox said.

"Which bedroom?" Alastor asked. His voice was still pleasant and completely divorced from the sensation Vox was having of walking very carefully over ground that might not be solid. "You said you had one room."

"We called it a bedroom," Vox insisted, his mind working quickly to fill the gaps. "We all slept there together."

"So you, your parents, and your nine siblings, all in one room, and the radio was positioned near the window there." Alastor repeated the details slowly.

"Yes," Vox said.

"That works," Alastor said. He nodded slightly and reached for his drink. For a moment, Vox felt the brief relief, having successfully navigated past a dangerous obstacle.

"Although," Alastor said, pausing with the glass just below his lips.

The relief retracted.

"You said your mother took in laundry," Alastor remarked, leaning his chin onto his hand. "Commercial laundry work requires a significant amount of space. You need basins and tubs and proper drying arrangements. It is not the kind of incidental work you can manage in a corner. It takes over an entire room. Where exactly did she do it?"

There was a pause. Vox was aware of the silence in real time. He was aware that it was stretching slightly too long and he was aware that his brain was working frantically to reconstruct the geography of a one room apartment that now needed to accommodate ten people sleeping and one person running a commercial laundry operation.

"We had a shared basement in the building," he said, trying to make the detail sound like a solid memory rather than a guess. "She used that space."

"In a small town outside Pittsburgh," Alastor repeated, tasting the words. "An apartment building with a shared basement."

"It was a working class neighborhood," Vox said, adding more confidence to his voice than he felt. "A lot of those older buildings had basements for storage and laundry facilities. That kind of thing was standard."

"Of course," Alastor said pleasantly.

Then the corner of his mouth twitched. His shoulders moved once, briefly, and the sound that came out of him was short and involuntary. It was a completely genuine noise in a way that almost none of the sounds he made in Vox's company ever were. It was a real laugh, small and helpless, and he covered it immediately with his glass, but he was not quite fast enough.

Vox stared at him, feeling the heat rise in his face.

"You're doing that on purpose," Vox said, his voice tight, almost swallowed by the sudden awkwardness.

"I am simply asking questions," Alastor replied. He was composed again, but the residue of his amusement was still visible in the brightness of his eyes. "They are reasonable follow up questions prompted by the information you voluntarily offered."

"You're finding holes on purpose," Vox said, crossing his arms and leaning back in his seat. "You've been finding them on purpose this entire time and saving them up."

"There are holes to find," Alastor said, reasonably. "I'm simply following where they lead. It's a natural consequence of the holes being there." He tilted his head, the motion genuinely curious now. "How much of what you told Robert at lunch was actually true?"

Vox considered this honestly for a moment. The whiskey had been working for long enough now that honesty felt less dangerous than it usually did, the various walls and calculations slightly less present, the space between what he was thinking and what he said slightly narrower than usual. "Some of it," he said.

"And how about what you told me now?"

"The part about making yourself indispensable," Vox said. "That was true. The core of it. I do believe that, I've believed it for a long time. You figure out what people actually want, what they want underneath what they'll admit to wanting, and then you make yourself the person most capable of providing it."

Alastor was quiet for a moment, looking at him with an expression that had shed most of its usual theatrical quality, just two eyes considering something. "That I believe," he said finally. "The steel factory and the one room apartment I believe considerably less."

"My father did work hard," Vox said. "And he did die relatively early. Those parts carry some truth."

"Some truth," Alastor said, with the tone of a man deciding that was probably the most he was going to get.

They sat with that for a moment. Outside, Hartford was quiet, the wet streets empty. Vox reached for his glass and found it empty, surprising him slightly. The bartender appeared and the glass was refilled before he'd fully processed the decision about whether to allow that.

He was drunk, he understood. Not fall down drunk, not dangerously drunk, but properly and genuinely drunk like he hadn't been in some time, the whiskey having done its work while he was busy paying attention to other things. His thoughts were moving a half beat slower than normal.

He started talking, and the story he told started as a coherent account of his early days at the station and gradually, through the effects of the whiskey and Alastor's persistent and entirely too perceptive questions, became something less architecturally sound. He caught himself adding details that contradicted earlier details. He backtracked twice. At one point he said something about a summer job that couldn't have happened in the same year as something else he'd said, and the look on Alastor's face when he caught it was brief but unmistakable, a flash of private satisfaction that he didn't bother fully concealing.

And Vox, who was drunk enough now that certain things were less concerning than they should have been, found he didn't particularly mind being caught. There was something almost peaceful about talking to someone who wasn't fooled, who was tracking the seams with evident enjoyment but not using them for anything except the pleasure of the tracking itself. He'd spent so long performing perfect versions of constructed stories that the experience of being gently and expertly disassembled had a quality he couldn't immediately name.

He was in the middle of a sentence, something about his first week at the station that was roughly forty percent true, when he noticed it.

Alastor's hand was resting on the bar counter beside Vox's arm. It had been there for some time, probably, but Vox only registered it now. At some point, with no moment he could identify as the beginning of it, the tip of Alastor's index finger had found one of the stitches along the edge of the bandaging. His fingernail was moving along the thread in small idle motions, the absent tracing of someone whose hands needed something to do while their attention was elsewhere. His gaze was directed past Vox's shoulder, toward the dark window.

Vox kept talking.

It hurt, mildly. The anesthetic was entirely gone by now and the cut registered with a dull persistent burn that sharpened whenever the thread was disturbed. Tugging at stitches was, he understood in the abstract clinical sense, exactly what the doctor had said not to allow. The wound needed to close cleanly. The thread was there to hold the edges together while it did.

None of this translated into saying anything to Alastor though.

He kept talking. His voice felt distant in his own ears, the pulse hammering at his temples. He watched in his peripheral vision, the slow idle motion of Alastor's finger along the stitching, the absolute absence of anything deliberate in it, a purely unconscious action. A blurry memory rose at the edge of his awareness, surfacing from somewhere far away from where he currently was, and he pushed it back down firmly before it could take shape.

One tug came sharper than the others. Not aggressive, just the unlucky catch of a fingernail on thread in exactly the wrong way, and the breath that left Vox was audible, a short and involuntary gasp that cut directly through the middle of his sentence.

Alastor's hand moved away instantly, snapping back to his side of the bar like he'd been burnt. He looked up from whatever middle distance he'd been occupying, his eyes coming back to Vox's face quickly, and his expression was briefly and unusually undefended, caught between being startled and embarrassed.

Neither of them spoke for a beat.

Alastor looked at Vox's arm, at the stitching, then back up. He cleared his throat once, quietly. "You know," he said, in the tone of someone selecting from several available options and choosing the one least likely to require him to acknowledge anything directly, "they do say the true measure of quality stitchwork is how well it holds under interference." He picked up his drink. "Yours appears to be holding adequately."

Vox looked at him. "That's genuinely the best you could come up with?"

"Under the time constraints," Alastor said, with a faint defensive quality that he immediately seemed to recognize as a mistake, before his composure reasserted itself completely. "I thought it was fairly reasonable."

"It was terrible," Vox said. "It was actually terrible."

"Perhaps," Alastor said, and took a sip of his drink, apparently deciding to let the subject die by refusing to engage further with it: "Does it still hurt?"

"Yes," Vox said. "It did before too, for what it's worth. You were quite committed."

The bartender set a glass of water in front of Vox that he hadn't ordered, apparently exercising independent professional judgment about what was needed. Vox drank it without comment.

"I'll be going now," Alastor said, getting up from his seat with impressive steadiness, "it's getting late. Don't stay down here too much longer."

"I'll be up soon."

Alastor looked at him for a moment. Then he turned toward the door, unhurried, his footsteps quiet on the bar floor.

"Goodnight, Whittman," he said, without looking back.

"Goodnight," Vox said.

Vox sat alone. His bandaged arm rested on the counter. His mostly empty glass sat beside it. The bartender was doing something at the far end of the room, somehow understanding he was sharing a space with a person who needed a moment.

He looked at the stitches, at the space on the counter where Alastor's hand had been.

He sat there for a little while longer.

Then he left enough money on the bar to cover everything with a comfortable margin, put on his jacket carefully around the bandaged arm, and started heading for the stairs.

Chapter 63

Vox climbed the stairs slowly, his bandaged arm held carefully against his body. The hotel was quiet at this hour, all of the guests already asleep. His footsteps were muffled by the carpet, the hallway lighting dim enough that he had to count door numbers to find the right one.

He stopped outside the room. Stood there for a moment, his good hand on the doorknob, considering his approach.

Alastor had told him to find other accommodations. He had made it perfectly clear that he expected his privacy, that sharing a room had been a temporary inconvenience he was no longer willing to tolerate. That had been before the incident with Robert, true, but Vox, in all his years of knowing Alastor, had learned better than to assume that gratitude or debt would alter the man's position. Alastor had a remarkable capacity for compartmentalization, an ability to separate favor from feeling and sentiment from decision without letting either bleed into the other.

Still, Alastor had been drinking. Had been drinking quite a lot, actually. Vox had noticed his movements getting slightly looser and his responses coming a half beat slower. It was possible, that in his current state he'd simply forgotten about the whole accommodation situation entirely.

It was worth testing, at minimum.

Vox turned the knob slowly, pushing the door open carefully.

The room was dark except for the ambient light filtering through the curtains from the street below. He could make out the shape of the bed, the furniture arranged in shadowy rectangles. And Alastor, lying on his side facing the wall, apparently already asleep.

Vox stepped inside, closing the door behind him with the same careful slowness. The latch clicked softly. He froze, listening.

No response from the bed and no shift in breathing.

He stood there for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness. His shoes felt suddenly very loud against the floor, each step announcing his presence. He bent down, working the laces loose with his good hand, the bandaged arm held awkwardly against his chest. The shoes came off one at a time, set carefully on the floor beside the door.

The floor was cold through his socks as he padded across it, careful and quiet, navigating around the furniture toward the spot where he had slept the night before. It was neither ideal nor comfortable, but it was infinitely preferable to attempting to sweet talk the front desk into finding him alternate accommodations at this hour while drunk, injured, and exhausted.

He lowered himself down, his back against the dresser, his legs stretched out in front of him. The bandaged arm was already starting to throb with a dull persistent ache that the whiskey and hospital anesthetic had been keeping at bay until now.

The floor was hard and unforgiving. He already knew the dull ache would begin to settle into his spine and hips within an hour, turning into actual pain that would linger well into tomorrow.

Yet it was still better than the alternative.

He looked toward the bed. Alastor was still facing the wall, apparently undisturbed by Vox's presence.

Vox reached up with his good hand and tugged at his tie, working the knot loose until he could pull it free. He fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, his fingers feeling thick and clumsy. The fabric felt suddenly constraining, too stiff and formal for a night spent on the floor. He managed to get the top three buttons undone before he gave up, his arm already growing tired from the awkward, one handed effort.

He was starting to feel the whiskey properly now. The pleasant buzz from earlier had evaporated, replaced by a heavy, leaden drag that pulled at his limbs. His thoughts moved slowly and his eyelids felt weighted with an exhaustion he could no longer fight. His body wanted nothing more than to surrender to the darkness.

He adjusted his position on the floor one more time. He rested his bandaged arm across his stomach and tucked his good hand under the back of his head to serve as a makeshift pillow. The floor pressed firmly against his shoulder blade and then against the sharp point of his hip. Every point of contact where bone met the hard surface seemed to ache as the lack of cushioning became impossible to ignore. The floor was cold, leeching the remaining warmth from his body through his clothes.

He closed his eyes and tried to force his breathing to slow.

He opened them again almost immediately.

The ceiling stared back at him, a flat expanse of darkness broken only by the faint, geometric shadows cast by the window frame. His shoulder was already starting to complain and his neck felt strained at an unnatural angle without the support of an actual pillow. He let out a quiet, frustrated breath as the realization settled in. It was going to be a long night.

This was fine. This was entirely manageable. He had slept in worse places before. He had slept in actual hell, which by definition had to be worse than the carpet of a mid tier hotel room in Hartford.

The flawless logic did absolutely nothing to make the floor feel any softer.

He shifted his weight again, trying desperately to find a position on the carpet that did not result in immediate, grinding discomfort. His bandaged arm protested the awkward movement with a sharp sting that made his eyes water. He sucked in a harsh breath through his teeth, holding his body perfectly rigid until the worst of the pain slowly faded away.

A pillow would help. Just one single, moderately stuffed pillow.

He cast a resentful glare upward toward the mattress looming above him. Alastor had two. There was no reasonable scenario in the entire universe where a single person actually needed both pillows to achieve restful sleep. This was especially true when said person was already asleep and facing the opposite wall anyway.

Vox stared at the edge of the mattress. In the dim, bluish light filtering through the window curtains, he could clearly see the corner of the spare pillow peeking over the edge. It was right there. It would be the work of seconds. He just had to reach up, grab it, and pull it down to his miserable spot on the floor. Alastor was dead to the world; he would not even notice it was gone until morning.

Vox rolled onto his uninjured side, pressing his palm into the carpet to brace himself for the heist. He paused, holding his breath, listening intently to the quiet room.

The angle pulled uncomfortably at his stitches. Wincing, Vox carefully rolled flat onto his back again, just for a second, waiting for the fresh throb of pain in his arm to pass before he made his next move.

He exhaled slowly and tilted his head back, looking straight up to gauge the distance to the edge of the mattress and he froze.

The sound that escaped him was a strangled, pathetic yelp. He moved so violently that the back of his head cracked against the sharp corner of the mahogany dresser. The dull thud echoed in the quiet room and a burst of white hot pain bloomed at the base of his skull, making his vision swim.

Alastor was leaning over the very edge of the mattress, his face suspended barely three feet above Vox’s own. He was propped up on one elbow, looking down with an expression of profound disappointment. The shadows cast by the singular desk lamp made his features look strange and severe, his eyes unnervingly bright in the dimness.

"Fucking hell," Vox wheezed, his good hand flying to the back of his head. "How long have you been awake?"

"What," Alastor asked, his voice flat and entirely unimpressed, "are you doing down there?"

Vox's heart was still hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird. Adrenaline making his fingers shake against his scalp. "You nearly gave me a heart attack. I thought you were asleep."

"And whose fault is that for overreacting?" Alastor replied mildly. He did not pull back, remaining in that looming position as he studied Vox's face with predatory precision. "I asked you a question, Vincent."

"I am trying to sleep," Vox snapped, his fingers probing the tender bump already forming on his head. "Obviously."

"On the floor."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Vox stared up at him. From this inverted perspective, the shadows made Alastor's smile look like a jagged, unnatural tear in the dark. The sheer absurdity of the question, after everything that had happened that day, made Vox's jaw tighten with a fresh surge of irritation.

"You told me to find other accommodations earlier today," Vox reminded him, his voice thick with a mix of resentment and bone deep exhaustion. "I am simply being unobtrusive about it until the sun comes up."

Alastor didn't respond immediately. Just continued looking at him with that same disappointed scrutiny, like Vox had failed some unspoken test.

Vox shifted his position slightly, trying to look more dignified while lying on his back on a hotel room floor with one arm bandaged and his shirt half unbuttoned. He folded his good hand behind his head anyway, attempting an air of nonchalant authority that was difficult to maintain from two feet below the mattress line.

"I am trying to sleep," he repeated, injecting confidence into his voice. "Which brings me to a relevant point. Can I have a pillow today, or is that too much to ask?"

Alastor’s expression didn't soften. He remained propped up on his elbow, his dark eyes tracking over Vox’s awkward sprawl.

Vox met his gaze, refusing to be the first to look away. "What? No pillow for the hero? I seem to remember saving your neck a few hours ago." He let a note of plaintive injury creep into his tone, playing the part of the wounded subordinate. "Come on, Alastor. My arm hurts so bad. I can't exactly sleep on it."

"Does it?" Alastor’s voice shifted, losing its flat edge of boredom and gaining a flicker of something that might have been actual interest.

"Well yes, it is literally being held together by a thread," Vox replied, gesturing vaguely with his bandaged forearm. "So obviously it hurts."

"Is it inflamed?" Alastor asked, his eyes narrowing as if he could see through the gauze.

Vox opened his mouth to make a cutting remark about how Alastor’s earlier habit of fiddling with his stitches at the bar certainly hadn’t done the healing process any favors, but he stopped himself. There was something in the way Alastor was looking at him, a faint tightening at the edge of his smile, that made it clear they had arrived at a silent agreement. They would not acknowledge what had happened downstairs. That moment of undefended proximity would be filed away among the many other things that had occurred in the past and would never be granted the dignity of words.

"I don't know," Vox said instead, his tone returning to a practiced, unbothered casualness. "You want to check?"

Alastor studied him for a long, quiet moment, the air in the room feeling suddenly heavy. "Not particularly," he said finally. "However, it would be a significant inconvenience to the schedule if the wound became infected and required a return to that dismal hospital. Show me."

Vox extended his arm upward toward the bed, the white bandaging looking stark in the dim light of the desk lamp.

Alastor looked down at the arm, then at the angle of Vox's body, and then at the floor itself. His mouth quirked into a smile that managed to communicate a profound disrespect for the entire arrangement.

"This is ridiculous," Alastor said, his voice flat with annoyance. He patted the edge of the mattress, the gesture brief and impatient. "Come up here to my eye level. I am not examining you like you are a dog presenting a paw for inspection."

Vox stared up at him, a sharp flare of offended pride cutting through the exhaustion. A dog presenting a paw. The sheer arrogance of the phrasing made his jaw clench, his instincts screaming to bite back, to remind Alastor exactly who he was talking to.

But his brain abruptly stalled, the insult clashing against the actual demand. Alastor was inviting him onto the bed, the same bed he had been so ruthlessly banished from the night before.

Alastor just looked back, his expression unchanging and expectant, waiting with the perfect stillness of a predator expecting its prey to simply walk into its mouth.

Vox realized after several seconds of stretched, ringing silence that Alastor was not joking. He was not going to clarify, and he certainly wasn't going to retract the statement. He was

simply sitting there, his hand resting against the burgundy coverlet, expecting immediate compliance.

To his profound and immediate horror, Vox felt a hot, prickling flush creep up his neck. It was a physical reaction that was mortifying in its transparency. He knew exactly what it was, he wasn’t an idiot, he understood the sudden, electric tension of being commanded into a shared, intimate space by a man who usually treated him like a biohazard. But the fact that his body was reacting to it at all made him want to crawl under the floorboards and die.

He swallowed hard, desperate to mask the sudden flush with irritation.

"Okay," Vox said slowly. He pushed himself up from the floor, his movements careful to avoid putting any strain on his arm. The whiskey was making his coordination slightly unreliable, his balance requiring more attention than usual. "Sure."

He sat down on the edge where Alastor had indicated. The mattress dipped slightly under his weight. This was a perfectly normal and reasonable scenario. One person has an injured arm, another one checks that injured arm, they happen to be sitting on the same piece of furniture during this examination. There was nothing strange about it.

Alastor sat up properly, the blanket falling away from his torso. He was still in his shirt and pants, apparently having passed out without bothering to change. He reached for Vox's arm, his movements careful, turning it slightly to examine the bandaging in the available light.

His fingers moved along the edges where the gauze didn't quite cover, checking the skin around the stitching. Looking for inflammation, presumably. For signs that the wound wasn't closing properly or that infection was setting in.

"It looks fine," he said after a moment. His tone was matter of fact, professional even. "The stitching is holding. No visible signs of complications." He released Vox's arm. "You should be fine to sleep."

"Good to know," Vox said.

Alastor looked at him for a beat. Then he turned over, facing the wall again, settling back into his previous position, clearly communicating the conversation was over.

"Goodnight," he said, his voice already taking on the slightly distant quality of someone on the edge of sleep.

Vox sat there on the edge of the bed. His arm was still extended slightly, hovering in the space where Alastor had been examining it. His brain was running through several competing interpretations of what had just occurred and coming up empty on all of them.

He looked at Alastor's back. At the unused pillow now within easy reach. At the expanse of mattress beside him.

He opened his mouth. Closed it again. Nothing he could say would improve this situation and several things might make it worse.

Instead of speaking, he moved. Very carefully, with the agonizing precision of a man defusing a live bomb, Vox began to shift his weight back onto the bed.

Alastor didn't stir.

Vox continued the maneuver, lowering himself down onto the mattress by degrees, his movements glacially slow. His head found the unused pillow. His body stretched out along the mattress edge, leaving a careful amount of space between himself and Alastor's back.

Still no response from the other side of the bed.

A smile was spreading across Vox's face, completely involuntary, making him want to laugh out loud with the sheer absurdity of his victory.

He'd actually fucking done it.

His internal monologue was already composing victory speeches. He had orchestrated Robert's downfall with godlike precision, transforming a volatile drunk into a discredited criminal through nothing but his own brilliant social engineering and a few flawlessly placed suggestions. He had positioned himself as the undisputed hero of Hartford, the brave, selfless young man who had taken a literal knife for a colleague. He had secured medical attention, official police documentation of his victimhood, and Margaret's renewed, fiercely protective commitment.

And now, as the crown jewel of the day's accomplishments, he'd secured sleeping accommodations that didn't involve a floor or a hallway or begging the front desk for help.

He'd played Alastor. That's what this was. He'd read the situation correctly, understood that Alastor's drunken state and lingering guilt about the stitching incident would create a window of opportunity, and he'd exploited it with perfect timing. The whole "checking for inflammation" routine had been a smart move on Alastor's part, a way for the proud man to avoid directly acknowledging what he was actually doing, which was surrendering his territory to Vox.

Vincent Whittman... no, Vox, because this was unquestionably a Vox level victory, had won the day on every single conceivable metric. He'd eliminated a threat, gained allies, secured sympathy, and improved his material conditions all in one flawlessly executed sequence of moves.

This was the kind of full victory he used to achieve regularly in Hell. He had been worried for a while there that wearing the skin of Vincent Whittman was making him soft, that the mundane drudgery of his day to day human life was making him forget how to operate at maximum capacity.

Today proved that he was still a god walking among insects.

He was still himself beneath these fragile human constraints. He was still capable of reading people like open books, predicting their behavior and maneuvering them into positions that served his interests without them ever realizing they were being moved. The Pacifist Protocol

did not matter. The lack of electricity running through his veins did not matter. He had his towering, unparalleled intelligence, and that was more than enough to conquer this decade.

The smile on his face was getting wider. He tried to suppress it, worried that if he let the triumph show too obviously he might actually laugh out loud and ruin everything.

He was in a bed. He had a pillow. His arm hurt but would heal. Robert was finished. Margaret was committed. Alastor was...

He stopped that thought before it could fully form. Didn't matter what Alastor was. What mattered was that Vox had managed to share his space despite explicit instructions otherwise, and Alastor was currently asleep and therefore not objecting.

He closed his eyes, still smiling, his body finally starting to relax into the mattress. The whiskey was pulling him down into sleep with increasing insistence, the day's events playing out in his mind like highlight reels.

He'd won everything.

Tomorrow he would wake up in this bed, probably before Alastor, and he would have to navigate the inevitable, prickly awkwardness of the morning after this arrangement, but that was a problem for future Vox. Present Vox was going to bask in the warm glow of this perfect, total triumph for as long as consciousness allowed.

His last thought before sleep finally dragged him under was a vivid mental image of himself standing center stage under a blinding spotlight, accepting the roaring applause of thousands, the undisputed, brilliant Hero of Hartford.

The fact that the stage was entirely within his own imagination, that the applause was from an audience that didn't exist, and that the only manifestation of his great power currently consisted of successfully negotiating his way into a shared hotel bed did not diminish his profound satisfaction in the slightest.

Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alastor hadn't slept a wink.

He'd heard the doorknob turn, followed by the measured footsteps crossing the room. He kept his breathing deep and rhythmic. He could not entirely articulate why he felt the sudden, overpowering compulsion to play the lightweight drunk. It was not out of apprehension, certainly. But there was a strange, charged quality to the air that Vincent brought in with him that told Alastor that the absolute best thing he could do in this moment was to remain completely still.

Vincent had entered the room like he didn't belong there, the tension in his body almost palpable. Alastor listened carefully, almost seeing the whole scene unfolding in his minds eye without even needing to look. Vincent had taken his shoes off near the door, padded across the carpet carefully, lowered himself on the floor right next to the bed in his sleeping spot just like he had the day before, now with much less reluctance.

Alastor had waited, curious to see what Vincent would do. Would he attempt to climb into the bed uninvited? Would he try to negotiate? The man had shown a remarkable talent for pushing boundaries, always testing the limits of what he could get away with. It would have been perfectly in character for him to simply slide under the covers and dare Alastor to object.

Instead, Vincent had apparently decided to play the martyr.

Alastor had almost been disappointed. He had been looking forward to the confrontation, mentally preparing the exact phrasing he would use to humiliate Vincent, to chew him out for his presumption and to banish him back to the floor. Vincent choosing to debase himself without a fight wasn't nearly as entertaining.

He lay there in the dark as he listened to Vincent shuffling around. Part of him had wanted to allow Vincent to spend the entire night on that miserable stretch of carpet and deal with the consequences in the morning. It would serve him right for the presumption of entering the room uninvited in the first place, especially when Alastor had been perfectly clear about him needing to find a room after last night.

But that would create problems.

The issue wasn't the sleeping arrangement itself, but the narrative that would inevitably form around it. Vincent had positioned himself, deliberately or otherwise, as the hero. Even though Alastor had the situation under control, Vincent had butted in and had gotten stabbed because he didn't know first thing about subduing an armed attacker. As a result, he had been rushed to the hospital, received stitches and official documentation of his injury. By morning, everyone would know the story. Margaret would ensure that, if no one else did.

And if that hero, that brave young man who'd thrown himself between a drunk and a knife, spent the night sleeping on the floor of his colleague's hotel room because said colleague wouldn't share the bed?

Alastor could already hear the whispers. The quiet disapproval slowly turning into judgment and disdain. He'd be the man who'd been too selfish and callous to offer basic decency to someone who'd been injured protecting others. Never mind that the entire situation was engineered nonsense. Never mind that Vincent had orchestrated the whole thing. The story was already written, and Alastor would be cast as the villain if he didn't play along.

He'd considered his options. He could wake Vincent and tell him to leave, enforce the boundary he'd set earlier. But that would make him look petty and cruel, especially given Vincent's injury. Or he could pretend to sleep through the whole thing and potentially wake up to find Vincent already in the bed, having made the decision himself. That would be even worse, because it would mean surrendering control entirely, letting Vincent dictate the terms of their arrangement.

The third option was to take control of the situation now, before Vincent could maneuver him into a worse position. Make it look like generosity, like Alastor was the one graciously offering accommodation rather than being forced into it. At least that way, he'd maintain the upper hand. He'd be the one setting the terms, deciding when and how this arrangement would happen.

So he'd waited until Vincent had seemingly settled to make the *practical* offer. He had rolled over and leaned off the edge of the mattress, fully intending to issue a simple demand for inspection. Instead, he found himself staring at the back of Vincent's head.

Alastor had remained in that looming position, watching with profound, silent disappointment. The man's situational awareness was truly abysmal. He simply waited until Vincent finally decided to roll onto his back, look up and nearly snap his own neck in sheer fear.

It was an undignified reaction, but it served its purpose. The wound needed to be checked, and peering down into the darkness was inadequate. Vincent needed to be at eye level. It was simply more efficient this way.

Alastor had checked the wound with genuine care, his fingers gentle against the bandaging. It was healing well, no signs of infection or inflammation. The hospital had done competent work, and Vincent had been following the care instructions. He'd released the arm and turned back toward the wall, making his dismissal clear.

He'd felt Vincent's hesitation, the long moment where the man had clearly been trying to decide what to do next. And then, predictably, Vincent had decided to stay in the bed.

Alastor had remained perfectly still, letting Vincent think he'd gotten away with it. Let him believe he'd won some kind of victory, that his brilliant maneuvering had secured him a place in the bed. It was easier this way.

This way, Alastor controlled the narrative and if anyone asked, he could frame it as an act of practical generosity toward an injured colleague rather than Vincent having successfully manipulated him.

The fact that it was actually both didn't particularly matter.

What did matter was that Vincent was in the bed now, and Alastor was going to have to deal with the consequences of that decision.

He kept his breathing even, his body relaxed. Behind him, he could feel Vincent settling in, could sense the other man's satisfaction radiating like heat.

The bed was a double, spacious enough that two people could sleep without touching if they were careful about it. Alastor had positioned himself close to the wall, leaving Vincent the outer edge.

He listened to Vincent's breathing begin to slow. The sooner Vincent was unconscious, the sooner Alastor could stop maintaining this performance and actually get some rest himself. Except Vincent didn't stay still for long.

Alastor felt the mattress shift as Vincent rolled onto his side. Then shift again as he apparently found that position uncomfortable. Then again, each movement making the bed dip and rise, making it hard to ignore.

Alastor had spent the entire evening watching Vincent work. Had observed him at the party, schmoozing with donors and managers, playing the role of the charming young professional. Had watched him during the confrontation with Robert, the way he'd positioned himself, the things he'd said, the way he'd guided the entire situation toward its inevitable, bloody conclusion.

The official story was that Robert had attacked Vincent unprovoked, that Vincent had been trying to deescalate the situation when the drunk had pulled a knife. The police had documented it that way, the witnesses had confirmed it, and Vincent had the injury to prove it.

But Alastor knew better.

He'd seen the knife earlier that day when searching for Vincent's shirt so he could send it down to be pressed, and when he'd moved Vincent's jacket, something heavy had tumbled out. A kitchen knife, wrapped and hidden under neatly folded clothes.

Alastor had stared at it for a long moment, turning it over in his hands. It was not for self defense, surely. That would probably be a pocket knife or something more easily concealed. This was a weapon meant for serious work.

He'd rewrapped it carefully, put it back exactly where it had been, and spent the rest of the day trying to figure out what Vincent was planning.

His first assumption had been that Vincent intended to kill someone at the party. The knife, the carefully maintained cover story about being a nervous weatherman, the way Vincent had been positioning himself socially, all of it pointed toward someone planning something underhanded. Alastor had considered warning him off, considered finding a way to make it clear that if Vincent was planning anything that would draw attention, Alastor would stop him.

But then the incident with Robert had happened, and Alastor had realized he'd been thinking too small.

Vincent hadn't been planning to kill someone at the party at all. Instead, he'd been planning to raise his social standing beyond what simple networking could achieve, and he'd used Robert to do it.

The more Alastor replayed the sequence of events, the less sense the official story made. Robert had been drunk, yes, but not incoherently so. He'd been angry, but his anger had been focused on Vincent specifically, triggered by something Vincent had said or done. And the knife, the weapon that had ended up in Robert's hand, had been Vincent's own knife, carefully planted so that Robert would find it and use it in exactly the way Vincent needed him to.

It was brilliantly executed. Robert had been a problem, a drunk who'd been causing trouble and making everyone uncomfortable. Vincent had identified him as a target, had maneuvered him into a public confrontation, and had arranged things so that Robert would attack him as it was witnessed and documented, completely destroying the man's credibility.

It was the kind of ruthless, calculating manipulation that Alastor recognized from his own past.

Vincent was dangerous. Not because he was violent, though the knife suggested he was capable of it, but because he was smart enough to make other people do his violence for him, to arrange situations so perfectly that no one would ever suspect his involvement.

And now that dangerous, calculating person was currently pressed against Alastor's back, having successfully maneuvered himself into proximity that Alastor couldn't escape without damaging his own reputation.

The thought made something cold settle in Alastor's chest.

If Vincent could do this to Robert, what would stop him from doing it to Alastor?

Robert had been in Vincent's way, had been causing problems, had probably said or done something that Vincent perceived as a threat. And Vincent had responded by systematically destroying him, using the man's own weaknesses against him until there was nothing left.

Alastor was also in Vincent's way. At least potentially. They were colleagues working in related fields, competing for the same opportunities, existing in the same social space. If Vincent decided that Alastor was a problem, if he perceived him as a threat or an obstacle...

The man had shown absolutely no hesitation in betraying others. The fact that Robert had arguably deserved it didn't change the fundamental truth of what Vincent had done.

Alastor had his own secrets. His own carefully hidden activities that would not survive serious scrutiny. If Vincent ever decided to turn that intelligence toward investigating Alastor, if he ever had reason to look closely at the patterns in Alastor's schedule, the missing persons who'd last been seen in areas Alastor frequented...

A murder accusation, even a false one, would trigger exactly the kind of attention Alastor couldn't afford. Police investigations, detailed timelines, witnesses being questioned about where Alastor had been and what he'd been doing. Even if the specific accusation was disproven, the scrutiny itself would be dangerous.

And Vincent was absolutely capable of framing him. If it served his purposes, if Alastor became an obstacle, Vincent would have no qualms about sacrificing him the way he'd sacrificed Robert. But Alastor prided himself on always being one step ahead, and that was precisely was why Barbara wasn't here.

Alastor had sent her away with a plausible excuse. He'd told her that with so many important people at the party, it was valuable to make connections and be seen by the right people. He'd suggested she position herself near the executives, make herself useful and demonstrate her competence. Barbara had accepted this reasoning without question, pleased to be given an assignment that seemed to recognize her capabilities.

What he hadn't told her was that her real purpose was surveillance.

With Barbara moving through the party, visible and active and associated with Alastor in everyone's mind, she created plausible deniability. If Barbara was highly visible throughout the evening, taking notes at panels, chatting with executives and being helpful, the attendees would automatically assume that Alastor's team was present. It created an ambient alibi that had served him well in the past. If the authorities ever tried to place Alastor at a specific location, witnesses would remember seeing what was essentially his secretary and subconsciously assume he had been hovering nearby. It tricked the crowd into feeling his presence, giving him the absolute freedom to move in the shadows completely unobserved. Although tonight that tactic served a secondary purpose.

Alastor had watched Vincent use the people around him like props in a stage play. He used Margaret as a shield of normalcy and Robert as a stepping stone. If Barbara had remained at Alastor's side, Vincent would have undoubtedly found a way to drag her into his performance. He might have dropped a fabricated hint for her to overhear, planted something on her person or forced her to be a credible witness to his staged heroism. By sending Barbara to the opposite side of the hotel, Alastor had taken his most valuable asset securely off the board.

It also established a necessary legal and social separation. If the police ever dug too deep into Vincent's erratic behavior, Alastor needed to prove the man was not part of his inner circle. With Barbara safely occupied elsewhere, Alastor could easily claim that he and his secretary were conducting official station business, while Vincent was merely a freelance contractor acting entirely on his own volatile impulses.

It was a delicate balance, staying close enough to Vincent to monitor what he was doing while maintaining enough separation to claim ignorance if anything went wrong.

Tonight had shattered that balance entirely.

Alastor was socially stuck with a man who had just demonstrated a remarkable capacity for cruelty and a man who was also, based on the patterns Alastor had observed earlier, obsessed with him.

That obsession made Vincent even more dangerous. An enemy motivated by pure self interest was predictable. You could anticipate their moves based on rational calculation of costs and benefits. But an enemy motivated by whatever twisted emotions Vincent was experiencing, was far less predictable.

The whole situation made Alastor want to act. He needed an outlet for the tension coiling in his chest, the frustration of being outmaneuvered and trapped in a situation he couldn't escape without making things worse.

He couldn't kill Vincent. That would create immediate, obvious problems. The man had just been stabbed defending a colleague. If he turned up dead in the hotel room of said colleague, no amount of careful planning would save Alastor from suspicion.

He couldn't kick Vincent out. That would ruin his reputation and validate every negative impression Vincent might want to create about him.

He couldn't even move without revealing that he'd been awake this entire time, which would raise questions about why he'd been pretending to sleep.

Tomorrow would bring its own challenges. The party's aftermath would need to be managed, Robert's situation would require careful monitoring to ensure no blowback reached him, and Vincent's new status as the hero would need to be factored into all of Alastor's calculations going forward.

But tonight, in the dark quiet of this hotel room, the only thing Alastor could focus on was the fact that he was trapped. Physically trapped between a wall and the body behind him, socially trapped by the narrative Vincent had created, strategically trapped by his own need to maintain appearances.

This was what Vincent did. This was his particular talent. He created situations where everyone else's hands were tied, where the only moves available were the ones he'd already anticipated and planned for. He understood social dynamics the way Alastor understood predation, recognizing the invisible rules and structures that governed human interaction and using them to constrain his opponents.

Alastor had encountered plenty of clever people who thought they could outmaneuver him. But Vincent was different, because he was smart in a way that felt entirely tailored to counter Alastor himself.

It was as though the man possessed a bespoke understanding of Alastor. He absorbed condescension without flinching, anticipated maneuvers Alastor had barely begun to execute, throwing Alastor off his rhythm.The most profoundly unsettling part of all was that they had known each other for a matter of months. In the grand scheme of a professional career, they were barely acquaintances. Yet Vincent navigated Alastor's defenses like he had spent years studying his every habit, tell, and weakness. It defied all logic.

Vincent had definitely done all of this before, probably many times, to people who'd never even realized they were being played, which raised the uncomfortable question: what exactly was Vincent doing with Alastor?

The attention, the flattery, the careful way Vincent positioned himself as useful and competent and non threatening, all of it could be genuine. Vincent might simply be trying to advance his career by attaching himself to someone he perceived as successful. The partnership might be real, the interest authentic, the friendship offered in good faith.

Or it might be exactly what he'd done to Robert. The gradual accumulation of leverage and opportunity building toward some plan that Alastor wouldn't see until it was too late.

He didn't know which it was. That was the problem. Vincent was too good at this for Alastor to be certain of his real motives. Every interaction could be genuine or could be manipulation, and there was no way to tell the difference until the knife came out, literally or figuratively.

Alastor stared at the wall, his eyes adjusted enough to the darkness that he could make out the texture of the wallpaper, the slight imperfections in the print. Behind him, Vincent slept peacefully, completely unaware that Alastor was awake and analyzing every aspect of their situation.

Alastor would wake before Vincent. He would establish distance and make it clear that this arrangement had been a one time accommodation that would not be repeated. And if Vincent tried to make it a regular thing, tried to leverage tonight's success into future demands, Alastor would shut it down immediately, social consequences be damned.

The night stretched out ahead of him, endless and uncomfortable.

Chapter End Notes

I'm fine thanks for your concern. Got buried alive but we good now.

Chapter 65

Vox woke up to the unpleasant feeling of morning light shining directly on his face.

He opened his eyes. The room was full of weak morning light filtering through the curtains, casting everything in shades of gray and pale yellow. He was lying on his side facing the window, his body curled slightly inward, his injured arm tucked against his chest in an unconscious protective gesture he must have adopted sometime during the night.

And pressed against his back, from his shoulders down to his hips, was the unmistakable warmth of another person.

Vox went very still. His first instinct was to move, to put immediate distance between himself and whatever boundary he had apparently crossed in his sleep, but he forced himself to remain frozen while his brain caught up to the situation. He was in Alastor's bed. That much he remembered clearly, the conversation downstairs, the examination of his stitches, the careful maneuvering onto the mattress while Alastor faced the wall. He had been very deliberate about maintaining space between them when he'd finally settled in for the night, leaving what he'd estimated to be a respectful foot and a half of empty mattress. But apparently his sleeping body had not gotten that memo.

Vox exhaled slowly through his nose, trying to assess the full scope of the problem. The position wasn't anything scandalous on its surface. It was just the two of them sharing a bed in a cold room, gravity and the depression in the mattress had done what they always did when people slept in close proximity. His spine was aligned against Alastor's back and the position might have been perfectly comfortable under different circumstances. This kind of accidental intimacy happened all the time between people who shared beds regularly and didn't really care.

The problem was that he and Alastor were not those people.

The problem was that for as long as Vox had known him, Alastor had made it abundantly clear that he valued his personal space to an almost pathological degree, and waking up to

find Vox plastered against him like some kind of barnacle was probably going to result in an immediate and permanent banishment from any future sleeping arrangements.

The problem was that Vox, despite knowing all of this, was finding it very difficult to motivate himself to actually move.

It was warm. That was the main thing. The room had gotten cold during the night and the shared body heat was pleasant. His back didn't hurt the way it would have if he'd spent the entire night on the floor.

He could just stay here for a few more minutes. That would be fine. Alastor was clearly still asleep, his breathing deep and even behind Vox, and if he moved now he'd probably wake Alastor up anyway. The considerate thing to do, really, was to remain perfectly still until Alastor woke on his own and they could address the situation like adults.

This rationalization lasted approximately thirty seconds before Vox's brain caught up with what it was actually doing and delivered a sharp, internal kick to his own reasoning.

He was making excuses to continue lying in bed pressed against Alastor's back.

He needed to get up right now, before this got any worse, before his own brain could spin any more elaborate justifications for behavior that was becoming increasingly difficult to explain as anything other than pathetic.

Vox moved. Carefully, slowly, he shifted his weight forward and away, creating distance between his back and Alastor's. The mattress dipped and creaked under the redistribution of weight. He froze, waiting, but Alastor's breathing didn't change. Still deep, still even, apparently undisturbed.

He pulled himself fully away and sat up, his feet finding the floor beside the bed. His head immediately protested the sitting position with a low, persistent ache that settled at the top of his skull where he'd cracked it against the dresser. The hangover was making itself known in earnest now, a dull throb that pulsed in time with his heartbeat.

He looked back at the bed.

Alastor hadn't moved. He was still on his side, facing the wall, but now that Vox had the elevation, he could make out the full absurdity of his position. He wasn't just facing the wall. He was pressed against it, his forehead literally touching the wallpaper, his body curled inward in a way that suggested he'd been trying to occupy as little space as possible. Like he'd been attempting to phase through the physical barrier and escape into the room on the other side.

Vox stared at him for a long moment, processing the implication that Alastor had been retreating.

At some point during the night, Alastor had apparently woken up to find himself being used as a human heating element and had responded by trying to fuse with the wall rather than wake Vox up and tell him to move. He'd literally run out of mattress, reached the absolute physical limit of how far he could go without falling off the bed, and had apparently decided that touching wallpaper was preferable to touching Vox.

The realization settled in Vox's chest with a weight that felt disproportionate to what it actually meant. It was almost funny, in a bleak sort of way. He'd spent the entire night convinced he'd won something, that he'd successfully navigated his way into Alastor's space through a combination of manipulation and strategic timing, and the reality was that Alastor had spent those same hours trying to escape him one inch at a time. It was so predictable, it aligned with everything Vox knew about Alastor and yet.

Vox felt something that might have been embarrassment if he'd been capable of feeling embarrassed about things like this anymore. It sat in his stomach like a small cold stone, uncomfortable and impossible to ignore.

He stood up properly, his feet finding his shoes by the door. His shirt was wrinkled, the collar bent at an odd angle from sleeping in it. He ran his good hand through his hair, trying to smooth it down. His reflection in the window showed him a man who looked exactly like he felt: tired, slightly disheveled, nursing a hangover and a wounded arm and a pride that had taken more hits in the past twenty four hours than it was equipped to handle.

He should savor this more. That's what he'd told himself last night, that he'd earned this moment of rest and comfort, that he deserved to bask in his victory for as long as he could stretch it. He'd manipulated the situation perfectly, read Alastor's state of mind correctly, positioned himself exactly where he needed to be.

Except he hadn't, had he.

Alastor had let him stay out of what appeared to be sheer conflict avoidance rather than any kind of genuine willingness to share space, and Vox had spent the night unconsciously chasing warmth across a mattress while the other man tried to get away from him.

Not exactly the triumph he'd imagined.

The thought that followed was worse: this probably meant Alastor would never let him sleep in the bed again. He'd tolerated it once under extraordinary circumstances, had been drunk enough or tired enough or guilty enough about the stitches to allow the temporary arrangement, but now that it had resulted in Vox treating him like a body pillow in his sleep, the experiment was almost certainly over. Next time they shared a room, assuming there was a next time, Alastor would probably lock the door and leave Vox to negotiate with the front desk or sleep in the hallway like some kind of vagrant.

Vox looked at Alastor's back one more time, at the way he was still pressed against that wall like it might save him, and felt the cold stone in his stomach get a little heavier.

He had genuinely believed he was doing better this time around. He had played the game, negotiated the contract, built the technology, and even humored the man's tedious social tests. He had been careful to avoid the specific, explosive mistakes he had made back in Hell, telling himself that if he simply performed the role of a competent, eager colleague, they might actually hit it off in this lifetime. Even if it was just a fragile alliance built to maintain appearances and reach Vox's ultimate goal, he had thought they were finally reaching some kind of functional equilibrium.

But standing here, watching Alastor practically vibrate with repulsion at his mere presence, the truth was impossible to ignore. It didn't matter what Vox did or how perfectly he played his part. Alastor just possessed some intrinsic, bone deep dislike for him that transcended

timelines and circumstances, an instinctive aversion that Vox could never strategize his way around.

He needed to get out of here.

He had the meeting. The exclusive breakfast with the bigwigs, the invitation that had been extended yesterday during the chaos of the reception. That was happening this morning, probably soon, and he needed to be presentable for it. He couldn't show up looking like he'd spent the night on a floor or wrapped around someone who was actively trying to escape him, couldn't let anyone see the hangover or the confusion or the strange, unwelcome feeling that was currently making his chest feel tight.

He moved quietly around the room, gathering his things. His tie from last night, his jacket draped over the chair. He buttoned his shirt the rest of the way, working the fastenings carefully around his bandaged arm. The stitches pulled slightly as he moved but the pain was manageable, a dull background ache rather than anything acute.

Alastor didn't stir.

Vox found his coat, checking his pockets. Everything was where it should be, all the pieces of Vincent Whittman's carefully constructed life accounted for.

He looked back at the bed one last time.

Alastor was still facing the wall, his forehead still pressed against it, his breathing still deep and even. Asleep, or doing a very convincing impression of it.

Vox left without saying anything. The door closed behind him with a soft click that sounded louder than it should have in the quiet hallway.

The hotel was just starting to wake up. He passed a maid in the corridor who nodded politely without making eye contact. The stairs creaked under his feet as he descended, each step

sending a small jolt through his skull that the hangover translated into fresh pain. He should have drunk the water the bartender brought him. Should have drunk several glasses of water, actually, but hindsight was a gift that arrived too late to do anything useful with.

The meeting was in a private dining room off the main restaurant area. He found it easily enough, following the directions someone had given him yesterday during one of the many conversations that had blurred together into an indistinct mass of handshakes and small talk. The door was already open, voices carrying out into the hallway.

Vox paused outside, straightening his collar one more time, checking his reflection in a nearby mirror. He looked fine. Tired, maybe, but fine. The bandage on his arm was visible beneath his rolled sleeve, a conversation piece that would work in his favor if he used it correctly. The Hero of Hartford, showing up to breakfast fresh from his ordeal, ready to talk business despite his injury.

He could work with this.

He pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The room was smaller than he'd expected. It was meant to be an actual conversation rather than a performance. A long table dominated the space, already set with coffee and pastries. Several men were already seated, their attention turning to him as he entered.

"Vincent," one of them said, rising slightly from his chair in greeting. "Glad you could make it. How's the arm?"

"Healing," Vox said, moving into the room with the easy confidence of someone who belonged there. "The doctors did good work. Should be fine in a week or so."

"Good to hear, good to hear." The man gestured to an empty chair. "Please, sit. We were just getting started."

Vox made his way around the table, shaking hands as he went, accepting the introductions that came at him in a rapid sequence. Names and titles and affiliations, information he would normally catalog and retain without effort, but this morning his brain was still working through the fog of the hangover and everything was taking slightly longer to process than it should have.

He shook another hand, took another step. Accepted another name.

And then he looked at the man sitting at the far end of the table and his brain came to a complete, jarring halt.

The man was younger than Vox would ever remember him. His hair was darker, less gray, his face less lined by the stress and wear of the industry that Vox had known him in. He had the same lean build, the same watchful eyes that tracked everything in a room, the same way of sitting that suggested he was used to being in charge of whatever space he occupied.

"And this is Robert Sinclaire," the man next to him said cheerfully, clapping him on the shoulder. "He owns a television network up north. Small operation now, but he's looking to expand."

The name hit Vox like a physical blow. A delayed reaction that felt like being punched in the chest by something he should have seen coming.

Bob.

Vox’s eyes widened slightly, the exhaustion suddenly burned away. He hadn't recognized the younger face at first glance, but the name and the title locked the pieces together instantly.

Vox had killed this man.

Not recently, not even in this life, but back when he'd been building his empire and Bob had been an obstacle in the way of what Vox wanted, Vox had eliminated him. Had manipulated

him first, strung him along with promises and half finished agreements and the kind of seductive vision of partnership that Vox had always been good at selling. Bob had owned a network, nothing huge but respectable, and Vox had wanted it. Had spent months working the angles, playing Bob like a fiddle, getting him to the point where handing over his legacy should have been the natural conclusion.

But Bob had hesitated at critical moments, kept getting cold feet or second thoughts or whatever version of self preservation had kicked in when he'd finally understood what he was actually being asked to give up. And Vox, who had already invested considerable time and effort into the acquisition and did not appreciate the uncertainty that could pop up again later down the line in their partnership.

Looking at Bob now, alive and younger and sitting at a breakfast table in Hartford completely unaware that he was sharing space with his future murderer, Vox felt something shift in his chest. Not guilt, obviously. He'd never felt particularly guilty about anyone, and especially not Bob. It was some strange combination of recognition and disorientation and the dizzying realization that he was looking at a piece of his past that had been absent from this new life until now.

He'd been waiting for this. Had been quietly scanning faces in crowds and listening to names and voices, trying to find someone he recognized from before, some proof that the world he'd landed in was actually the same world he'd left rather than some parallel version where everything was slightly different. Most of the people he'd encountered had probably been background noise in his previous life, faces he might have passed in hallways or seen across rooms but never actually known well enough to recognize decades later. He'd started to wonder if this was a different timeline entirely, if something about his resurrection had dropped him into a universe where the people he'd known simply didn't exist or had been replaced by different actors playing the same roles.

But here was Bob. Completely recognizable despite the years that separated this version from the one Vox had known.

It was thrilling.

That was the word his brain supplied, cutting through the disorientation. Thrilling. He'd killed this man. Had stood over his body from up above, had watched him collide with the

pavement below, had taken everything he owned and added it to an empire that Bob would never benefit from or even fully understand.

Vox realized he was staring. Realized that he'd been standing frozen for several seconds longer than was socially acceptable, his hand still extended in the general direction of Bob's chair. His face must have shown something, some flicker of recognition or shock that he hadn't managed to suppress quickly enough.

But his body had kept moving through the motions even while his brain was elsewhere. He was shaking Bob's hand now, his mouth was forming words, something professional, the kind of pleasantry that Vincent Whittman would offer to a man of Bob's position.

He finally took a seat. The conversation continued around him. Coffee was poured, pastries were passed, and the men at the table began the actual conversation. Vox participated mechanically, his attention split between the immediate demands of the conversation and the longer, stranger conversation happening inside his own head.

The men were talking about stations now. Markets and opportunities and the current state of broadcasting in various regions. Vox tracked the conversation, contributing when expected.

"Vincent," Bob said suddenly, leaning forward slightly in his chair, his hands folded on the table in front of him. "I didn't have the chance to meet you yesterday but my colleagues here were very impressed with what they saw yesterday. The way you handled yourself during the reception, everything I've heard about your performance at your current station. You've got real presence. Natural talent for the medium."

"Thank you," Vox said, because that was the correct response and because some part of him, despite everything, still responded to praise from people like Bob with the kind of pleasure that was difficult to suppress.

"We'd like to make you an offer," another man said. Vox had already forgotten his name, though he recognized him as someone important in the hierarchy. "There's an opening at one of our flagship stations. Morning anchor position. It's a significant market, much larger than what you're working with now. We think you'd be perfect for it."

Vox leaned forward. This was what he'd been angling for, the kind of opportunity that Vincent Whittman was supposed to pursue. A bigger market, a better position, a chance to climb the ladder toward the kind of influence and reach that would serve his longer term goals.

"That's very generous," he said, keeping his voice measured. "What station?"

"WCOL in Columbus," Bob said, leaning back in his chair looking satisfied. "Top of the hour traffic, solid listenership and a morning slot that's *actually* prestigious."

The station would be hours away by train. A completely different state. Far enough that maintaining any kind of regular contact with his current life would be effectively impossible.

Far enough that he would lose contact with Alastor.

The thought arrived fully formed, bypassing all the usual filters and rationalizations and landing in his consciousness like a stone dropped into still water.

"Columbus is a strong market," another man added, his tone enthusiastic. "Growing fast. You'd be getting in at exactly the right time. The station's expanding its news coverage, and they want someone who can really own that morning slot. Build an audience. Become a household name in the region."

Vox nodded automatically, his face doing what it needed to do while his brain caught on something and couldn't let go. If he took this job, he'd have to leave. Pack up his life and move it somewhere else entirely. Start over with new colleagues, new networks, none of the foundations he'd spent months building here, including whatever he'd been building with Alastor.

He was supposed to turn Alastor in. That was the plan. The thing he'd told himself was necessary, the proof of virtue he needed to demonstrate. He'd been circling around it for months, building up the case in his own mind for why this was justified and necessary.

If he moved to Ohio, that plan became impossible.

"The salary is competitive," Bob continued, sliding a folded piece of paper across the table. "Take a look. I think you'll find it more than fair."

Vox picked up the paper, his eyes scanning the numbers without really processing them. The figure was good. Very good, actually. More than he was making now by a substantial margin.

"When would you need me to start?" he heard himself ask.

"Ideally within the month," the man to Bob's right said. "We'd give you time to relocate, of course, get settled. But we're looking to fill the position quickly. The current anchor is leaving at the end of next month and we'd like some overlap for the transition."

That was barely enough time to pack up and say goodbye to people and figure out what the hell he was supposed to do about the Alastor situation. Which meant he couldn't leave. Not when he was supposed to be proving something. Not when abandoning the plan would demonstrate exactly the kind of moral weakness he was trying to overcome.

"It's a significant opportunity," Bob said, watching Vox's face carefully. "The kind of position that could launch a real career. You'd be foolish to pass it up."

Vox knew Bob was right about that last part.

Besides, there were other ways to prove virtue. He could volunteer somewhere. He could donate to charity or help wounded veterans. Any number of things that would demonstrate moral improvement without requiring proximity to Alastor.

The angels had never said turning in Alastor was required for redemption. That was his own invention, his own story he'd constructed to justify whatever he was doing.

"What do you think, Vincent?" another man asked, smiling. "This is exciting, isn't it?"

"It is," Vox said, trying to sound more enthusiastic than he felt. "Very exciting."

His brain was moving too fast, jumping between thoughts without completing any of them. If he moved, he'd be starting over. That was inefficient, strategically speaking. It made more sense to stay where he was, build up more before making a larger move.

Except he'd never been strategic like that before. If someone had offered him a better position before, he would have taken it immediately, would have abandoned whatever he was working on without a second thought. That's how he operated, Vincent needed constant forward momentum.

So why wasn't he operating that way now?

"We don't need an answer this second," Bob said, apparently reading something in Vox's expression. "But we'd like to hear back from you soon. A few days at most. This is the kind of opportunity that won't wait around."

"Of course," Vox said. "I understand."

"Is there anything that would complicate a move?" the man to Bob's left asked. "Family commitments? Anything like that?"

"No," Vox said automatically. "Nothing like that."

"Good," Bob said, nodding. "Then I imagine this is just a matter of working through the details. Figuring out logistics."

The logistics of abandoning a plan he'd supposedly committed himself to and walking away from someone he'd spent months positioning himself near.

"Is there any possibility," Vox heard himself say, "of a similar position at one of your stations closer to this region? I have some personal commitments that would make relocating difficult."

The men exchanged glances. Vox could read the calculation happening behind their eyes, the assessment of whether he was worth the extra effort of accommodation or whether they should just move on to the next candidate who would be more flexible.

"What kind of personal commitments are we talking about?" Bob asked, his tone still friendly but with an edge of curiosity that suggested he was recalculating something.

"Professional connections," Vox said quickly. "I've built some valuable relationships here. It would be useful to maintain them while advancing my career."

"Relationships are important," another man agreed. "But Columbus is where the opening is. That's what we have available right now."

"We can look into it," Bob said finally. "But I have to be honest with you, Vincent. The Ohio position is what's available right now. The opportunities closer to your current location are already filled with people we're happy with. We'd be asking someone to step aside to make room for you, and that's not something we do lightly."

"I understand," Vox said, because he did. They were offering him something concrete and he was asking them to rearrange their entire organizational structure to accommodate his preference for staying where he was. That wasn't how these things worked. You either took the opportunity presented or you stepped aside and let someone else have it.

Vox picked up his coffee, took a sip he didn't taste. His arm was starting to throb under the bandaging, a dull reminder of yesterday's disaster.

"Either way, I appreciate the offer," he said, setting the cup down carefully. "I really do. I just need a bit of time to think it through properly."

"Understandable," Bob said, though his expression suggested he found it slightly less understandable than his words implied. "Just don't take too long. These opportunities have a way of disappearing if you hesitate."

The conversation moved on. More talk about markets and trends and the future of television broadcasting. Vox barely contributed, his attention elsewhere.

He was in a sour mood by the time the breakfast wound down. Not obviously so, nothing that would show in his performance or affect how the men at the table perceived him, but internally he could feel it settling over him like a gray cloud, coloring everything with frustration and an irritation he couldn't quite direct at any single source.

They weren't going to bend on the location. That much had become clear as the conversation progressed. The job was in Ohio or it wasn't anywhere. Take it or leave it, and if he left it they'd find someone else who would be more than happy to fill the position.

It was a good offer. By any objective measure it was exactly what he should be pursuing. He could advance his career much faster than he did in his original life, unlock more opportunities and ascend higher than he had. More money, more followers, better platform for building the kind of influence that would serve him in the long run.

And he was going to have to turn it down.

Or at least delay long enough that they got tired of waiting and moved on to someone else.

The thought made him angry, a hot spike of resentment that he couldn't quite articulate even to himself. He'd worked for this, had spent months building Vincent Whittman into someone worth noticing, someone these men would want to recruit. And now that it had worked, now that he'd succeeded in getting exactly the kind of attention he'd been aiming for, he was going to throw it away because he couldn't figure out how to disentangle himself from a situation he should never have gotten tangled up in in the first place.

The breakfast ended. Handshakes and promises to follow up were exchanged. Vox played his part, maintained the performance, gave them no reason to think he was anything other than carefully considering their generous offer.

He left the dining room with the gray cloud still hanging over him, following him up the stairs and down the hallway toward the room he was sharing with a man who was probably going to make this entire day worse just by existing.

He needed to figure out what he was actually going to do about the job offer. The door to the room was closed. Vox dug out the key from his pocket, the metal cold against his palm, and pushed it open.

Alastor was standing in front of the mirror with his back to Vox, making final adjustments to his appearance. He was fully dressed, his suit immaculate, his hair arranged perfectly. Vox realized he'd been awake and functional for some time. His eyes drifted to the door's reflection in the mirror as Vox entered, sweeping briefly over his face in an assessing glance that revealed nothing of what he was thinking.

Then he averted his gaze without saying anything, his fingers adjusting his collar one final time.

Vox stood in the doorway, his hand still on the knob, watching Alastor's reflection in the glass. There was something in the other man's posture that felt off, a stiffness that wasn't quite his usual controlled stillness. He looked as if he was preparing for something, gathering himself, like he was about to walk into a situation he expected to be unpleasant.

Alastor moved away from the mirror, crossing toward the door Vox was currently blocking. His expression was neutral, professionally pleasant in the way that meant he had absolutely no intention of engaging in actual conversation.

"Where are you going?" Vox asked, because Alastor was clearly about to leave and the cold shoulder treatment was already making Vox's mood, which had been deteriorating steadily since the breakfast meeting, edge toward something actually hostile.

"I have a presentation," Alastor said. His voice was distant, the tone of someone speaking to a colleague they were forced to interact with but had no particular interest in. "They're expecting me downstairs."

He moved to step past Vox, apparently considering the conversation concluded.

Vox didn't move out of the way. "I'll come with you," he said. "I'd like to watch."

He wouldn't, actually. The last thing he wanted right now was to sit in an audience and watch Alastor perform for a room full of people. But something in the other man's demeanor was setting off alarms in Vox's head, some combination of the cold shoulder and the careful distance and the way Alastor was clearly trying to extract himself from this interaction as quickly as possible.

Going to the presentation felt like the right move. Strategic, even. It would show support, demonstrate partnership, make Vox look like someone who invested in his colleagues' success rather than only his own. That kind of thing played well with the people who mattered, the ones who were watching to see how the younger generation handled themselves in these professional contexts.

Alastor looked at him for a long moment, his expression unreadable. "If you'd like," he said finally, his tone suggesting he had absolutely no preference either way.

The lack of reaction was somehow worse than active resistance would have been. Vox could work with resistance, could push back against it and find the angles and pressure points that would give him leverage. But this blank, professional courtesy gave him nothing to work with. It was like trying to get purchase on smooth glass, everything he tried sliding off without leaving a mark.

"Great," Vox said, forcing brightness into his voice. "Lead the way."

Alastor moved past him into the hallway. Vox followed, closing the door behind them, falling into step beside the other man as they headed toward the stairs.

The silence between them was heavy and uncomfortable. Vox tried to fill it.

"How long is the presentation?" he asked, keeping his tone casual, like this was normal conversation between colleagues.

"Thirty minutes," Alastor replied. "Followed by questions, presumably."

"What's the topic?"

"Regional programming strategies. Adaptation of national content for local markets." Alastor's voice was clipped, delivering information without additional commentary.

"Sounds interesting," Vox lied.

Alastor didn't respond to that. Just continued walking, his pace steady, his attention apparently focused entirely on navigating the hallway and stairs without acknowledging that Vox existed beyond his immediate physical presence.

Vox tried again. "The breakfast meeting went well," he offered, despite the fact that it had decidedly not gone well and he couldn't help but feel resentful about it. "Met some interesting people. They made an offer."

This got a flicker of response, just the briefest turn of Alastor's head in his direction before he looked forward again. "Congratulations."

Nothing about the response suggested curiosity about what the offer was or whether Vox planned to take it or any of the things that people who actually cared about each other's lives might ask as follow up questions.

Vox felt the black cloud hanging over him get a little darker. "It's in Ohio," he said, because apparently he was going to keep talking even though Alastor was clearly not interested in the conversation. "They want me to relocate."

"I see." Alastor pushed open the door to the stairwell, holding it for Vox.

"I'm considering whether to take it," Vox continued, descending the stairs beside him. He was aware he was being annoying now, was pushing into space that Alastor had made clear he wanted to keep closed, but the combination of the hangover and the job offer and the morning's earlier humiliation with the wall hugging was making him reckless with whatever boundaries still existed between them.

"That seems wise," Alastor said. "It's always prudent to carefully evaluate significant career decisions."

Vox wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him until something real fell out. Wanted to demand to know what exactly had shifted between last night and this morning, what boundary Vox had crossed that warranted this level of cold professional distance. But he couldn't do that, because asking would require admitting that he cared about the shift, and admitting he cared would give Alastor information Vox wasn't ready to hand over.

So instead he just kept pace beside him, maintaining the performance of casual collegiality while internally cataloging every small way Alastor was demonstrating exactly how little he wanted to be having this conversation.

They reached the main floor. Alastor navigated through the hallway toward what Vox assumed was the room where the presentation would take place. People were already gathering, small clusters of attendees moving toward the doors.

Alastor paused outside a side door that appeared to lead backstage, or whatever equivalent existed in this context. He turned to Vox.

"I need to prepare," he said, gesturing toward the door. "You can find a seat inside."

"Right," Vox said. "Good luck."

"Thank you," Alastor replied, already moving toward the door.

Vox watched him disappear through it, the door closing behind him with a soft click that felt heavier than it should.

He stood there for a moment in the hallway, people moving past him on their way into the main room. His arm was starting to ache again, the dull throb working its way through whatever remained of yesterday's painkillers. His head hurt from the hangover. His chest felt tight with frustration about the job offer and confusion about Alastor's behavior and the general sense that he'd woken up this morning with some kind of victory and it had disintegrated over the course of a few hours into something that felt uncomfortably like defeat.

What could he have done to make Alastor this angry?

Because that's what this was, he was increasingly certain. Not distraction or focus on the presentation ahead, but actual anger being expressed through the kind of cold professional distance that was somehow more cutting than direct confrontation would have been.

The question was what he was angry about.

The sleeping arrangement? Possible, but Alastor had been the one to invite Vox onto the bed in the first place, had checked his stitches and then turned over and gone to sleep without any indication that sharing the space was a problem. If he'd woken up to find Vox pressed against him maybe that had changed his perspective, but Alastor hadn't said anything about that and had just continued with his routine like nothing had happened.

Something else then. Something Vox had said or done or failed to do that had crossed a line he hadn't known existed.

Or maybe it was nothing to do with Vox at all. Maybe Alastor was just in a bad mood for his own reasons and Vox was taking it personally when it had nothing to do with him.

Vox didn't believe that. Alastor was too precise in his emotional expressions, too controlled in how he presented himself. He was angry it was about something specific, and the timing suggested that something was related to Vox.

He pushed open the door to the main room and found a seat toward the middle, somewhere that would give him a good view of the stage without being so prominent that his presence would be particularly noted. The room was filling up around him, people settling into chairs, low conversations creating an ambient hum.

Vox sat and stared at the empty stage.

He didn't really care whether Alastor was angry at him. Alastor's emotional state was not his problem, was not something he needed to manage or fix or even acknowledge. Here they were colleagues, barely even that, just two people who happened to work in related industries and had been thrown together by circumstance and were now sharing hotel rooms out of practical necessity rather than any kind of genuine desire to be in each other's company.

If Alastor wanted to give him the cold shoulder that was fine. Vox had better things to do than worry about whether he'd somehow offended a man who spent half his time trying to avoid being in the same room as him anyway.

Except it wasn't fine. It was bothering him more than he'd like to admit, that same tight feeling in his chest that he couldn't quite identify and couldn't make go away just by telling himself it was stupid to feel it.

He sat in his chair and waited for Alastor to come out on stage and told himself very firmly that he did not care about any of this.

The lights dimmed slightly. The conversations around him quieted. Somewhere backstage, Alastor was presumably preparing to walk out and deliver whatever presentation he'd been assigned, and Vox was going to sit here and watch and maintain the performance of being a supportive colleague even though what he actually wanted to do was grab Alastor by his perfectly pressed collar and demand to know what the fuck his problem was.

The side door opened.

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